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**RE-EXAMINING THE WORKS OF AHMAD MAHMUD:
A FICTIONAL DEPICTION OF THE IRANIAN NATION IN THE SECOND
HALF OF THE
20TH CENTURY**

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Dissertation

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Dedication

Dedicated to my son, Manai Kherad-Aminpour, the joy of my life. May you grow with a passion for literature and poetry! And may you face life with an adventurous spirit and understanding of the diversity and complexity of humankind!

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

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In this dissertation, I examine the work of an important yet insufficiently studied Iranian novelist and short-story writer, Ahmad Mahmud. Because of his early affiliation with leftist socialist groups, Mahmud's work has been subject to various, sometimes contradictory, interpretations by critics. Such readings of Mahmud's work have resulted in making him a controversial literary figure. Hence, this project aims to re-examine the critics' current viewpoint of Mahmud's works, which they regard as "ideologically driven" and "Marxist and/or political writing." Although Mahmud's ideology played a significant role in creating his stories, particularly in his early works, I argue that storytelling is the predominant concern for Mahmud. In fact, a large portion of his writing depicts his own life and his own development as a person and a writer. Mahmud's portrayal of the main protagonist of his stories, Khaled, who goes through

various stages of transformation, indeed reflects his own evolution and development. In other words, I contend that Mahmud's literary output is essentially "autobiographical." In addition, I argue that Mahmud's autobiographical fiction helps to shape and articulate his emerging role as a novelist as he strives to record decades of turbulent social and political upheaval and change in the post-1950s era, as the Iranian nation undergoes various stages of transformation and growth in search of a new identity and political autonomy. With an analysis of a select number of Mahmud's novels, furthermore, I discuss the social and historical nature of this transformation of the author/protagonist/nation and argue that from early on Mahmud was determined to depict the linear socio-political movement that took place in the modern history of Iran in the character of his memorable hero, Khaled, who appears in various guises and matures both as a person and a social entity from one novel to the next.

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A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

For the transliteration of the Persian words in this dissertation, I have followed the *Iranian Studies* transliteration system, therefore, omitting diacritical marks in proper nouns. For the already established authors and political figures, I have used the standardized spelling as it is found in print. In addition, I have used “u” instead of “ou” or “oo” in proper nouns, for instance, Mahmud, rather “Mahmood” or “Mahmoud” as it is commonly used in various publications. Additionally, I have used “gh” in proper nouns such as Sadeghi, rather than “Sadeghi” and Mossaddegh rather than “Massaddeq.”

PREFACE

In this dissertation, I examine the work of an important yet insufficiently studied Iranian novelist and short-story writer, Ahmad Mahmud. Because of his affiliation with leftist socialist groups, Mahmud's work has been subject to various, sometimes contradictory, interpretations by critics. Such readings of Mahmud's work have resulted in making him a controversial literary figure. Hence, this project aims to re-examine the critics' current viewpoint of Mahmud's works, which they regard as "ideologically driven" and "Marxist and/or political writing." Not only have such critics paid scant attention to other aspects of Mahmud's writings such as form, plot, themes, and language, but they have also mainly focused on the ideological perspective found in Mahmud's work. Although Mahmud's ideology played a significant role in creating his stories, particularly in his early works, what Mahmud actually sought was to depict decades of turbulent social and political upheaval and change in the post-1950s era, as the Iranian nation was undergoing various stages of transformation and growth in search of a new identity and political autonomy. As is evident in his writing, from early on, Mahmud made a deliberate choice to become a writer, a writer who for more than fifty years of his life was preoccupied with recording recent history in his fiction, thereby trying to illustrate the linear socio-political events that took place in Iran.

While many critics have focused on Mahmud's ideologically driven writing, his work should also be examined in terms of literary form and genre. I argue, therefore, that

the author's intention is not to act as a radical or dedicated political activist to promote his ideology through his writing, but rather he tries to depict the struggle, the transformation, and the growth of the Iranian nation in the second half of the 20th century, as his memorable protagonist, Khaled, moves from one novel to the next.¹ As Khaled's personal and political awareness grows and transforms before the eyes of the readers through thousands of pages in various novels, the history of a nation and its struggle to find its identity, its place in history, and its voice also unfolds. In essence, Khaled is the fictional character of the author himself, as Mahmud tells the story of the Iranian nation as he knows it and as he himself experiences these various stages of transformation.

All Mahmud's novels follow one underlying theme. They all portray the transformation and political and social awareness of the main character, Khaled, who appears with various names and descriptions in various novels in the course of several decades concurrently as the Iranian nation experiences the ebb and flow of socio-political upheaval. In other words, one can categorize Mahmud's novels as the "*Entwicklungsroman*" or "developmental novel," which illustrates the growth of this central character, Khaled/Nation. Therefore, as part of the plan to write about the growth of the Iranian nation, Mahmud could not simply avoid the adolescent stage depicted in his first and most celebrated novel, *Hamsaye-ha* [The Neighbors] (1974).² In addition,

¹ "Khaled" is the protagonist of Mahmud's first novel, *The Neighbors*, and he is the leading character who reappears in Mahmud's many novels, sometimes given a new name and identity.

² *The Neighbors* was initially published in 1974 by Amir Kabir Publisher and was reprinted four times until 1978 where it was banned. It consists of six chapters and its central theme deals with the socio-political occurrences from 1950-1953.

the reader will follow Khaled in many novels still to come only to witness his transformation, his position on his ideals, his disappointments and hopes, even the failure of his ideals, and nevertheless, his maturity gained due to age and wisdom. This time, however, Khaled appears as Nozar Esfandiari, the protagonist of Mahmud's final novel, *Derakht-e Anjir-e Ma'abed* [The Fig Tree of Temples] (2000). It is the author/narrator, Khaled, who reappears in various stories as a young man in exile, as a broken-spirited man returning home, as a middle-aged man in the midst of war between the two neighboring countries of Iran and Iraq, and as a crestfallen mature man looking back on his youth.

In this study, I consider the boundaries of literary and comparative theories by viewing ideology and literature as spaces in which identity and cultural values are produced and argued. To support my argument, I employ an interdisciplinary methodology and seek to intervene in constructive ways to introduce a fresh look at Mahmud's major works, with the hope of filling the existing void. Mainly, this dissertation examines three primary issues: content, production, and comparison. To begin with, my research consists of textual analyses of Mahmud, wherein I explore his committed writing in relationship with ideology, noting when metaphors or specific narrative supports or subverts the content. I also approach Mahmud's writing as a place in which local and transnational views intersect and at times may even conflict. One such intersection is the use of global ideologies such as Marxism in the local writing of

Mahmud, often reflected in his works, in which he introduces the southern part of Iran against the backdrop of the political turmoil of the 1950s as a focal point in his stories.

To support my argument, I have incorporated a combination of primary and secondary sources, as well as interviews with the author and his close circle of friends, throughout this project. One possible hypothesis that might arise from such an investigation is that by examining the interviews with Mahmud's friends and literary figures who knew Mahmud closely, I identify the contours of his intended audience, the factors that influenced Mahmud's writing, and the transformation of his generation. This approach enables me to explore the multiple angles in analyzing Mahmud's works.

Another aspect of my analysis is ethnographic, which focuses on the audience. In viewing writings identified as "ideologically driven," this project builds upon the critical studies of previous novelists such as Bozorg Alavi,³ Jalal Al-e Ahmad,⁴ Mahmud Dowlatabadi,⁵ and Simin Daneshvar,⁶ who have demonstrated and explored this style of writing. My focus is on the subjective experience of reading/viewing literature and the different types of aesthetic and literary writings. For the most part, I have incorporated

³ Bozorg Alavi (1904 -1997) was an influential Iranian writer, novelist, and political intellectual. He was a founding member of the communist Tudeh Party of Iran in the 1940s. After the 1953 coup against Mossaddeq, he spent his life in exile until 1979 Revolution. He is mostly known for his novel *Chashm-ha-yash* [Her Eyes], which was published in Iran in 1952 but was subsequently banned.

⁴ Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923-1969) was a prominent Iranian writer, thinker, social and political critic. He used a colloquial style in prose, as he is considered a follower of avant-garde Persian novelists like Mohammad-Ali Jamalzadeh.

⁵ Mahmud Dowlatabadi (b. 1940) is both writer and actor; he's known as a realist writer of stories of immigration and rural life, in which he largely draws on his own experiences.

⁶ Simin Daneshvar (28 April 1921 – 8 March 2012) was an Iranian academic, novelist, fiction writer and translator, largely regarded as the first major Iranian woman novelist. The first novel by an Iranian woman was her novel, *Savushun* [Mourners of Siyavash] (1969), which is translated in many languages and is considered one of the bestseller Iranian novels.

traditional and cultural theories and utilized literary comparison to discern how the ideology of these writers is negotiated and thus expose the many layers of influence in an individual's or interpretive community's construction of identities.

I hope to demonstrate and provide insight not only into the ways in which Iranian literary discourses are engendered, but also into how competing transnational ideologies are intertwined in this medium, thereby leaving open the possibility of multiple and even subversive readings.

I divide this dissertation into five chapters, each of which covers a different aspect of Mahmud's writings. These chapters are presented in historical order, starting with the 1950s and ending with 2002, the year that Mahmud died, thereby covering the whole scope of Mahmud's works and its transformation.

Chapter One presents an overview of young Mahmud's political and economic background and discusses how his personal life and political history influenced his style of writing, especially as a regional writer who aimed to portray the culture of the southern Iranian people. In doing so, I hope to draw attention to the importance of the author himself and the significance of his works in modern Iranian fiction.

Chapter Two explores how modern Iranian literature considers the place of its origin and the formation of its identity and additionally examines how the legacy of the past is recast to explain the present. I argue, therefore, that the works of contemporary Iranian writers as well as exilic Iranian literature, which deal with modern Iranian literary identity, are based on the identity constructed by the generation before them.

Furthermore, by focusing on this era, I hope to contribute to a better understanding of the 1930s, 1940s, and especially the 1950s, which shaped Iranian politics and literary production. My intention is to look at specific developments during the 1950s, since my initial hypothesis is that this period has influenced Mahmud and many writers of his generation. This was a generation of writers who believed that the writer should be committed to social and political causes and that his/her writing should address political and social issues in order to improve the human condition. Nevertheless, this study extends beyond the issue of Iranian nationalism, and it explores the larger question of identity formation pertaining to Iranian writers as a transnational, inter-textual process. Furthermore, in locating Mahmud as an Iranian writer who could not escape this ideological influence, I also examine the body of fiction of a period that contributed to a new literary movement. I argue, therefore, that this literary movement in the modern history of Iran significantly changed the political landscape in the decades following the 1953 *coup d'état*.

In Chapter Three, I examine a number of Mahmud's novels that deal with the transformation of the author/protagonist/nation. Storytelling is an essential concern for Mahmud, so a large portion of his writing in various novels is devoted to depicting the story of the main character, Khaled, as he acquires political awareness and progresses in different stages of life. Mahmud's three major novels, namely *The Neighbors*, *Dastan-e Yek Shahr* [The Tale of a City] (1981), and *Zamin-e Sukhteh* [The Scorched Land] (1982) are considered by many critics a "trilogy" as these novels are thematically linked together

and each is a continuation of the one before. Even the point-of-view of all three novels is the same, and each story is told in the first person point-of-view. Moreover, several characters reappear in the later novels or their names are mentioned again so that at times the reader can follow the story where it was left off in the earlier novel. In this chapter, I also argue that certain characteristics in Mahmud's works help to shape and articulate his emerging role as a novelist.

In this chapter, I also address Mahmud's choice of characters, the simple, working-class people, who dominate Mahmud's stories. Generally, the characters in Mahmud's stories are oil refinery workers, tanker drivers, shopkeepers, fishermen, teahouse owners, and common trades-people. However, this chapter locates Mahmud's characters in a more transnational perspective and considers the interaction with capitalism as it spreads beyond the borders of Iran in the Cold War era. In many countries, including the Communist states in Eastern Europe, Marxism was the dominate ideology, thus various writers have documented a global fascination with this form of expression, which reflects the writer's commitment to improving human conditions. I turn my attention to a more dour aspect of global ideology and its influence on writers like Mahmud. As modeled in most Russian novels of that era, in his first novel, *The Neighbors*, Mahmud seems to have deliberately divided the society into opposing forces: good versus evil. He has also divided the communities and differentiated the classes. The working class or proletariat, for instance, is depicted throughout as "good."

In Chapter Five, I discuss the regionalism aspect of Mahmud's writings as the author uses the southern part of Iran, particularly, his birthplace, Ahvaz, as the focal point and the backdrop of many of his stories. One of the most important features of Mahmud's writing is the setting he chooses, perhaps deliberately, for he is very familiar with this region. Mahmud is from the south and he knows the south very well and is aware of his native land; he is also very much familiar with the geography and culture of many near and far villages and small towns as far as Dezful and Shushtar. It is for this reason that with the exception of a few of his stories that take place in Tehran or unspecified places, his stories predominantly occur in the south, especially in his native Khuzestan. Mahmud's devotion to this part of the region and its diverse culture and ethnic backgrounds, especially for the Arab fishermen, is reflected vividly in many of his novels.

Furthermore, I discuss Mahmud's style of writing, in particular in the context of Socialist Realism. In his writings, Mahmud uses the technique of descriptive point of view, which focuses on the exterior world rather than the interior. The characters' physical features, their gestures and their verbal expressions, places they live in, towns, houses, and to a certain degree the streets, even smells, the sound of the Karun River, the colors, and the natural surroundings are all depicted vividly in most of Mahmud's stories.

Chapter One

A Brief Biography of Ahmad Mahmud

Mahmud's personal life and its influence on his work

Ahmad Mahmud, the contemporary Iranian novelist and short story writer, was born on December 25, 1931⁷ to a working class family in the city of Ahvaz, located in the southwest Province of Khuzestan in the Persian Gulf. His real name was Ahmad E'ata, but after publishing his first story under his accidental pen name, Ahmad Mahmud, he became known as Mahmud and hardly ever used his real name. This is rather an interesting fact that Mahmud deliberately chose to give himself a fictitious name and disguises himself in the portrayal of his fictional central character, Khaled, throughout his work of fiction. Looking at the great works he had produced during his fifty years of writing career, one can undoubtedly consider him one of the most prolific novelists of modern Iranian literature. It is no wonder that he and his generation of writers dominated Iranian literary production in the second half of the 20th century. Although he is primarily known for his masterpiece, *The Neighbors*, which immediately promoted his status as a novelist, he published many other books, including nine short story collections

⁷ Persian calendar: 4, 10, 1310

and five other novels.⁸ In addition to his novels and short stories, he wrote a number of film scripts.

Mahmud's place of birth and growing up in the oil rich land of Khuzestan where the British sought constant control of the oil industry, played a significant role in shaping his style of writing, especially as a regional writer. In Mahmud's fiction, particularly in *The Neighbors*, the reader can trace the author's life experiences, growing up in the south during the tumultuous era of the nationalization of the oil industry, and even more so, the political upheaval of his time, which frenzied his generation. It is also evident that his early writing reflects his then political views and his engagement with the Tudeh Party of Iran,⁹ a pro- Soviet Communist organization, and opposition activities at a very young age, which resulted in his imprisonment. As Mahmud himself tells us in his short autobiography, after finishing high school, "he became embroiled in politics since in those days everybody, the young and the old, was consumed with politics."¹⁰

Consequently, in 1951, barely 20 years of age, Mahmud was arrested for his political activities and his protest against the then popularly considered tyrannical regime of

⁸ The short story collections are titled: *Mul* [The Paramour] (1957); *Darya Hanuz Aram Ast* [The Sea Is Still Calm] (1960); *Bihudegi* [Futility] (1962); *Za'eri Zir-e Baran* [A Pilgrim In the Rain] (1967); *Pesarak-e Bumi* [The Little Native Boy] (1971); *Gharibeh-ha* [Strangers] (1971); *Didar* [Visit] (1990); *Qesseh- ye Ashena* [Familiar Tale] (1991); *Az Mosafer ta Tabkhal* [From Passenger to Cold Sore] (1992). And the novels are titled: *Dastan-e Yek Shahr* [The Tale of a City] (1981); *Zamin-e Sukhteh* [The Scorched Land] (1982); *Madar-e Sefr Darajeh* [The Zero Degree Latitude] (1993); *Adam-e Zنده* [The Living Human] (1997); *Derakht-e Anjir-e Ma'abed* [The Fig Tree of the Temples] (2000).

⁹ The Tudeh Party of Iran [Party of the Masses of Iran], or Hezb-e Tudeh Iran) is an Iranian communist party which was formed in 1941, with Soleiman Mohsen Eskandari as its head. The party had considerable influence in its early years and played an important role during Mohammad Mosaddeq's campaign to nationalize the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company and his term as prime minister. The crackdown that followed the 1953 coup against Mosaddeq is said to have destroyed the party, although the party continued to exist even in the early years of the Islamic Republic.

¹⁰ *Didar ba Ahmad Mahmud* (2005), Nashr-e Mo'in, 21.

Mohammad Reza Shah.¹¹ Due to his imprisonment, he was not able to continue with his formal education and was faced to spend two years of his life in mandatory military service.¹² To make the most of his time in the military service, he joined the Military College of Officers as a third degree Lieutenant.¹³ This was apparently a promising position, but according to the well-known critic, Jalali, “it was a great mistake,”¹⁴ since soon many officers were arrested for their affiliation with the Tudeh Party. It was a costly decision as Mahmud too was soon arrested in the aftermath of the *coup d'état* of 1953,¹⁵ and this time he was exiled to Bandar Lengeh, a small remote port town in the Persian Gulf, which later became the setting of his novel *The Tale of a City*.

Before being exiled, he was taken to Armored Division 2¹⁶ of Ahvaz Branch, and it was there that he witnessed the arrest and the execution of many revolutionary officers and high-ranking members of the Tudeh Party. He and three other young officers were soon transferred to a prison in the city of Shiraz, then to Jahrom, Lar, and finally to the port city of Bandar Lengeh, where he was forced to spend five years of his exilic life. It

¹¹ Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1919 – 1980) was the last Shah of the Pahlavi dynasty until his overthrow by the Islamic Revolution of 1979. He came to power during World War II after an Anglo-Soviet invasion forced the abdication of his father Reza Shah. During Mohammad Reza's reign, the Iranian oil industry was briefly nationalized under Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh before a US-backed coup d'état overturned the then Iranian government.

¹² All Iranian males above 18 years of age are required to serve a two-year mandatory service.

¹³ Known as “Daneshkade-ye Afsari” in Persian, University Officers was considered one of the oldest educational institutions in the country.

¹⁴ Jalali, *Baran bar Zamin-e Sukhteh*, 37.

¹⁵ The 1953 Iranian coup d'état (known in Iran as the 28 Mordad coup) was the overthrow of the democratically elected government of Iran, and its head of government Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh on 19 August 1953, orchestrated by the United Kingdom (under the name 'Operation Boot') and the United States (under the name TPAJAX Project). The coup saw the transition of Mohammad-Reza Shah Pahlavi from a constitutional monarch to an authoritarian one who relied heavily on United States support to hold on to power until his own overthrow in February 1979.

¹⁶ *Lashkar-e Zerehi 2*

was here that he wrote a story titled “Ranj o Omid” [Anguish and Hope], a story that was in reality never published. The storyline reflects the hopelessness and the defeat that the young generation felt and struggled to fathom in the post 1953 *coup d'etat*.

Upon his release from exile in 1956 and finally able to return to his birthplace, Ahvaz, Mahmud noticed a great number of changes in his surroundings: banks and financial institutes were mushrooming overnight; the revolutionaries of yesterday were now preoccupied only with making money and getting richer each day. As he recalls, “... the obsession with politics had disappeared in favor of an obsession with money. And the city was crawling with banks, foreign companies and dealerships.”¹⁷ He was 27 years old and unemployed, thus taking whatever jobs offered to him and working as a day laborer, driver, and construction worker until other non-menial opportunities presented themselves to him. Meanwhile, he began nourishing his first passion for cinematography and scripts by writing short stories. According to Mahmud, writing was his second choice of artistic expression since writing novels did not require of him the time consuming yet necessary formal schooling, nor the tremendous financial burden of such schooling to become a film producer. Ironically, this was also the time that Mohammad Reza Shah’s social reform was taking place.¹⁸ New developments led the country toward progress and modernity, though in Mahmud’s view, “a superficial progress.”¹⁹ The author’s personal experiences with this period are therefore rendered in the story of

¹⁷ *Didar ba Ahmad Mahmud*, 23.

¹⁸ It was called “Enghelab-e Sefid” which literally means White Revolution, and it was intended to offer stages of development to modernize the country.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

“Bazgasht” [The Return] (1974), and projected onto the main character, Goshtasb, or Shasb for short.

In search of a suitable job, one that did not make him compromise his principles and with which he could fulfill his obligation to support his family, a friend managed to secure for him a position in the Ministry of the Interior.²⁰ This job required him to travel extensively to the southern and remote cities of Jiroft, Bam, Zahedan, and many villages of Lorestan. According to Mahmud, doing so kept him preoccupied for ten years, during which time he also became the father of four children. Many of his encounters with local people during this time are depicted in his novels and short stories, which surely reflect the local color and regional dialect, making Mahmud, as one critic, Mohammad Ali Dastghayb, claims, “the storyteller of the southern Iran.”²¹

Mahmud began his writing career by publishing a few short stories in the *Omid-e Iran* magazine. In 1959, Mahmud published his first collection of short stories “*Mul*” [The Paramour], although not under his real name, Ahmad E’ata, but under his pen name Ahmad Mahmud. Soon after, he published a series of short stories. Moreover, his “Modern Persian Short Stories” was published in 1980, which featured a translation of his 1969 story “As Deltangi” [On Homesickness].”

In the beginning of his writing career as a novelist, in his famous novel, *The Neighbors*, Mahmud situates his central character, Khaled, at the most crucial point of the Iranian socio-political conditions. Its focal historical point is the 1950s, a turbulent

²⁰ *Vezarat-e Keshvar*

²¹ Dastghayb, Abdolali. *Naghd-e Asar-e Ahmad Mahmud* [A Review of Ahmad Mahmud’s Work], 32.

decade that silenced and defeated the people of Iran as they experienced sparks of self-realization and awareness and as they struggled to define their social and political potential. These were the turbulent years of the nationalization of the oil industry, the years in which the nation resisted the British intervention and demanded its fair share of its natural resources, oil. It is for this reason that the very first voluminous novel of Mahmud is a well-measured, well-planned novel against the backdrop of these new phenomena affecting the country. Exile, execution and imprisonment, revolution and war, are themes that Mahmud experienced throughout his life and would portray in many of his future novels. Accordingly, as the protagonist of his novels, Khaled, goes through decades of transformation so does the nation itself. Analyzing his works today, one can clearly argue that Mahmud's novels were not the product of his imagination, but rather his conscious and deliberate choice of continuing to create a juxtaposition to the socio-political changes in modern history of Iran. In a sense, Mahmud is a historian with a fictional pen. Soon after publishing his first novel, *The Neighbors*, he moved to Tehran, where he resided until his death in 2001.

In his later years, shortly after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, he published his further extensive novels, including *The Tale of a City* and *The Scorched Land*. The latter was published initially with 11,000 copies, with a second printing a year later of 22,000 copies. These two novels could be read as a continuing saga to *The Neighbors*, set in his native Khuzestan during three important periods: the days of the nationalization of the oil industry in 1951, the aftermath of the *coup d'état* which restored Pahlavi's Dynasty in

late August 1953, and later in 1980, the devastating Iran-Iraq War. In Mahmud's writings, in particular the above-mentioned saga trilogy, the author's concern for the poor and the working class, his keen attention to the socio-political circumstances, and his love for his native Khuzestan are evident. In addition, in the early 1990s, Mahmud published two collections of short stories, "Didar" [The Visit] and "Gheseh-ye Ashena" [The Familiar Tale]. Soon after, he published his memorable novels *Madar-e Sefr Darajeh* [The Zero Degree Latitude] (1993) *Adam-e Zنده* [The Living Human] (1997), and *The Fig Tree of Temples*, with the latter being Mahmud's last work, published in 2000, two years before he died of respiratory failure in Tehran on October 4, 2002.

Chapter Two

Ahmad Mahmud and the writers of his generation

The Shaping of Modern Fiction in Iran

The long period from the 19th century to the first decade of the 21st century in Iran has witnessed a burgeoning of historical and literary productions as well as the gradual emergence of modern fiction. At the same time, trends, patterns of change in themes, and techniques of narration have varied from period to period. Literary trends like nationalism,²² literary commitment or *ta'hod-e adabi*, modernism,²³ socialist realism,²⁴ surrealism,²⁵ regional writing, magic realism,²⁶ experimental writing,²⁷ and memoirs²⁸ on war and prison, all are innovative approaches utilized by the writers and critics in creating fiction in Iran over the past century. The development of these trends can be divided into four main periods that gave birth to three generations of writers as follows:

- The Pioneer Writers, who primarily wrote travelogues and personal diaries as well as historical novels, which typically advocated for nationalism, (1845-1925)

²² Here refers to the form of writing that promotes a social movement with a focus on the nation.

²³ Set of cultural tendencies and an array of associated cultural movements, originally arising from wide-scale changes to Western society in the late 19th and early 20th century.

²⁴ Generally, expressed in the visual arts, films, and writing, which depicts social and racial injustice, economic hardship, through literal pictures of life's struggles; often depicting working class as heroic.

²⁵ Cultural movement that began in the early 1920s and best known for the visual artworks and writings of the group members.

²⁶ An artistic genre in which magical elements or illogical scenarios appear in an otherwise realistic or even normal setting; it has been widely used in relation to literature, art, and film.

²⁷ Generally refers to novels that place great emphasis on innovations regarding technique and style.

²⁸ Literary genre, a memoir (French: *mémoire* meaning "memory", or a reminiscence), forms a subclass of autobiography.

- The Social Novelist (1925-1953)
- The Second Generation, who also felt that it had a literary commitment and aimed to bring about social changes through writings (1953-1979 Islamic Revolution)
- The Post Revolution writers (1979-present)

The Pioneer and Historical Writers:

19th century Iran was an age of travelogues and personal diaries. During the reign of Nasereddin Shah Qajar²⁹ and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911)³⁰ new trends in genres of prose surfaced, mainly in the form of European travel diaries. In addition, factors such as the establishment of the Dar ul-Funun School³¹ in Tehran, which offered a modern curriculum, a number of students and envoys sent to Europe as part of a cultural exchange, the rise of literacy among the upper-class, and the introduction of the printing press and newspapers in the second decade of the 19th century, had a direct impact on shaping the history of fiction-writing in Iran. These travel diaries were embellished, as they were mostly written by officials and envoys as well as Qajar's princes and kings, like Nasereddin Shah himself. Conscious of their lack of technological advancement, these officials and reformists strived to enhance their knowledge of the outside world, in particular European developments in industry.

Despite their primary intention to record their travel experiences to Europe, their aim,

²⁹ (Persian: ناصرالدین شاه قاجار) Nasereddin Shah Qajar ruled Iran from September 1848 to May 1, 1896 when he was assassinated. He was the son of Mohammad Shah Qajar and the third longest reigning monarch king in Persian history after Shapur II of the Sassanid Dynasty and Tahmasp I of the Safavid Dynasty. He was also the first Persian monarch to ever write and publish his diaries.

³⁰ (Persian: انقلاب مشروطه) took place between 1905 and 1911. The revolution led to the establishment of a parliament in Iran.

³¹ (Persian: دارالفنون) was founded by Amir Kabir, then the royal vizier to Nasereddin Shah, in 1851, and it's considered the first modern institution of higher learning in Iran.

nevertheless, was to mimic the changes in the perception of a modern world that were happening outside their country. Moreover, most of these historians and politicians thought to introduce modernity in Iran and implement these changes for reform through their writings. Thus, these writings contributed greatly to the formation of modern Persian fiction.

Other factors in social and historical advances, such as the rise of education and translated European works, also greatly influenced the development of the genres of fiction in Iran. Astonished by the rule of law and the freedom they witnessed in Europe, the pioneer political reformers like Mirza Fath Ali Akhundzadah,³² Mirza Agha Khan Kermani,³³ and Mirza Malkom Khan Nazem-al-Dowleh³⁴ wrote articles and letters concerning the grim conditions of Iran. Nazem-al-Dowleh, for instance, who has spent many years living abroad penned his controversial *Ketabche-ye ghaybi* (*The Oracular Notebook*, 1859) and established his newspaper, *Ghanun*, in which he criticized the

³² (1812-78) He is considered the founder of modern literary criticism in Iran, who used literary criticism as the mean for his reformist ideas.

³³ (1853-96) also a literary critic, he emphasized "that it is meaning, not the mode of expression, that exerts the real influence on the reader,"[1] and thus discouraged the "destruction of the natural clarity of language ... by means of complicated metaphors, difficult words, long sentences, and complex expressions." [2]

1. Parsinejad, Iraj. *A History of Literary Criticism in Iran* (1866-1951). Bethesda, MD: Ibex, 2003. p 44.

2. Ibid, pp 72, 73.

³⁴ (1833-1908), was born to an Armenian Christian family in Iran [1] and was an advocate of Freemasonry during the period leading up to the Iranian Constitutional Revolution. A believer in Social Darwinism, he adopted an Iran modeled on the values of the enlightenment and urged a return to the Persian heritage. He later converted to Shi'a Islam, and entered government service. He was elected as instructor at the Dar ul-Funun school in 1852. He went to Paris in the diplomatic service in 1857 [2] and was exiled by Nasser ad-Din Shah for doing so in 1862.

1. Lloyd Ridgeon, *Religion and Politics in Modern Iran* (I.B. Tauris, 2005), p 14.

2. Nikki R. Keddie, with a section by Yann Richard, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 2006), pp 431-32.

corruption of his time and corresponded with other reformists.³⁵ Many distinguished literary figures of the time, including Ali Akbar Dehkhoda (1880-1956), Mohammad-Taghi Bahar (1886-1951), Mohammad Ali Forughī (1877-1942), Mohammad Ghazvini (1877-1949), Abbas Eghbal Ashtiani (1896-1956), and Said Nafisi (1895-1976) were either journalists, linguists, authors, or editors who contributed influential articles to journals of their period.

The early experiments in fiction in Iran also included the genre of fictitious travelogues. The theme that was important for this period was nationalism or *hobb-e melli*. Through their writings, these pioneer reformists aimed to improve the general state of political awareness and sense of morality.³⁶ Before long, the early personal travel diaries, like *Ketab-e Ahmad*,³⁷ triggered a new genre of popular fictitious travelogues, such as *Siahat-name-ye Ebrahim Beyg ya bala-ye ta'aşşob-e u* [The Travel Diaries of Ebrahim Beyg, or The Pitfalls of his Patriotism] (Cairo, 1895), by Zayn-al-Abedin Maragheh.³⁸ Inspired by this new readership, these fiction writers began to utilize fiction to their advantage, as a tool for spreading modernism and high morality, and to criticize the tyrannical rule and the backwardness of their society.

Another important trend that contributed to the formation of fiction in the early

³⁵ Parsinejad, 1990, pp 541-66.

³⁶ Aryanpur, *Az Şaba ta Nima* I, pp 393-94.

³⁷ Mirza Abdulrahim Talibov Najar Tabrizi (1834-1911) was an Iranian intellectual and social reformer who authored *Ketab-e Ahmad ya Safineh-ye Talebi* (Ahmad's Book or the Talibian Vessel, Istanbul, 1893-96). It consists of two volumes and was inspired by Jean Jacques Rousseau's tract on education, *Emile*. The book is based on conversations btw. the author and his fictional seven-year-old son, Ahmad, and deals with scientific, historical, political and religious topics.

³⁸ (1840-1910) he's considered the first Iranian novelist. His novel was a criticism on Iran's social affairs. He lived as a merchant for many years in Istanbul.

20th century was the appearance of translations of French and English fiction. Although the translation of French works into Persian dates back to the 1830s, yet in the early 20th century and under Reza Shah³⁹ (1925-41) works of French writers such as Maurice Leblanc, Michel Zevaco, or Louis Lamartine were read among the educated class. The first translation of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (translated in Persian as *Tireh-bakhtan*), for instance, was serialized in the monthly *Bahar*⁴⁰ in 1910. The translations from European novels like *Le Comte de Monte Cristo* [The Count of Monte Cristo] (1844),⁴¹ and *Les Trois Mousquetaires* [The Three Musketeers] (1844) by Alexandre Dumas were significant for their descriptive techniques, which were sometimes emulated by Persian novelists. As an example, Mirza Habib Esfahani's (1315-1897) translation or rather an adaptation of James Morier's *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* can be mentioned here, especially that these translations were sometimes used as a comparison between European and Persian fictions.⁴²

The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan was also important since its satirical portrait of the period was a precedent for the narrative fiction of the turn of the century, particularly the first two decades of the 20th, a period that many critics⁴³ called "the golden age of satire in poetical invective, political ballads, and fictional and journalistic prose." Secondly, the very popularity of these imported novels "indicated the emergence

³⁹(1878 – 1944), رضا شاه پهلوی ruled Iran from 1925 until he was forced to abdicate by the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran in 1941.

⁴⁰1910, by Mirza Yusef Khan Ashtiani, Eteṣām-al-Molk (1874-1938).

⁴¹ It is considered an adventure novel by French author Alexandre Dumas. It was translated in Persian in 1899.

⁴² Translate in Persian as *Majara-ha y Hajji Baba az Esfahan*, Sepanlu, 1993, pp 27-30.

⁴³ Kamshad, 1966, pp 21, 29; Gheisari, 1998, p 51; Aryanpur, p 26, *Az Šaba ta Nima*.

of a new readership, mainly among urban and middle class, with new tastes and preferences, and with time to allot to read in the privacy of their homes.”⁴⁴ This new readership, however, demanded a somewhat different language. As Sa’idi-Sirjani tells us, “Dehkhoda’s *Charand o Parand*, to a certain extent, owed its success to the fact that it was intelligible to ordinary folk and at the same time entertaining to the intellectual elite and sophisticated men of letters.”⁴⁵ Sheykh Musa Nasri (1882-?), the director of Nosrat School in Hamadan, was another provincial writer of historical novels. *Eshq o Saltanat ya Fotuhat-e Kourosh-e kabir* [Love and Kingship, or the Victories of Cyrus the Great] was the first part of his historical trilogy published in Hamadan in 1919.⁴⁶ It claimed to be “the first novel composed in Iran in the Western fashion.”⁴⁷

It is needed to say that two Persian writers/translators played an essential role in the development of modern Persian fiction in the early 20th century: Moḥammad Ali Jamalzadeh⁴⁸ and Ṣadeḡ Hedayat.⁴⁹ Their contributions illustrate how many of the most influential writers of fiction in modern Persian were influenced not only by translations from European and American literature, but by their own direct experiences with western literature. Generally, most of the writings of this period conveyed a curious blend of nostalgia and factual information about the past glories of Iran, gleaned from historical

⁴⁴ Ibid, Aryanpur, p 29.

⁴⁵ (1931-1994), writer, poet and journalist, (Sa’idi Sirjani, p 218)

⁴⁶ Aryanpur; Kamshad, p. 45, *Az Ṣaba ta Nima II*, p. 252

⁴⁷ Browne, Lit. Hist. of Persia IV, p 464.

⁴⁸ (1892-1997) (محمد علی جمالزاده) one of the most prominent writers of Iran in the 20th century. Best known for his unique style of humor and due to his great influence over Persian short-story writing, he is often referred to as the father of short stories in Iran.

⁴⁹ (1903-51) (صادق هدایت) Iran's foremost modern writer of prose fiction and short stories.

chronicles and the scholarly research of contemporary Orientalists. Their romantic nationalism, expressed in the glorification of pre-Islamic Iran, surfaced later in the works of writers such as Bozorg Alavi and Zayn-al-Abidin Mo'tamen.⁵⁰ Mo'tamen's *Ashiana-ye Oghab* [The Eagle's Nest] (1939) was a popular historical novel of the late Reza Shah era.⁵¹ The book, in ten volumes, revolves around an adventurous love story in which historical figures, such as Khajeh Nezam-al-Molk and Hasan-e Sabah, appear as key characters. Hosayn Masrour (1888-1968), another historical novelist of the period, whose most significant story, *Dah Nafar Ghezelbash* [The Ten Kizilbash], first appeared in installments from 1948 onwards in the newspaper *Ettela'at*, and later published as a book in five volumes in 1956. In addition, *Daliran-e Tangestani* [The Heroes of Tangestan] (1931) was one of the few early novels directly concerned with the contemporary history of Iran.⁵²

The dark satanic city, the classic metaphor for the inevitable forces of modernity, lurks in the very title of Morteza Moshfegh Kazemi's (1902-77) *Tehran-e Makhuf* [The Horrible Tehran], a somewhat tedious depiction of love, greed, and prostitution, which appeared in two volumes in 1922. It was succeeded by a series of works by Abbas Khalili (1891-1971), such as *Ruzgar-e Siah* [Black Days] (1924) and *Entegham* [Revenge] (1925), both describing the plight of women. Other popular titles of the time were *Shahrnaz* (1926), by Sayyed Yahya Dawlatabadi (1863-1939), better known for his

⁵⁰ (b. 1914); teacher, writer, and critic.

⁵¹ (Meskub, *Az Şaba ta Nima* pp 25-31).

⁵² Aryanpur: *Az Şaba ta Nima*, 1966, pp 41-51; Kamshad, 11, pp 238-58.

memoirs of the Constitutional and post-Constitutional periods, and *Man Ham Geryeh Kardeh-am* [I, Too, Have Wept] (1934), by Jahangir Jalili (1909-39). However, perhaps the most significant writer of the genre was the journalist Mohammad Masoud (1905-17), whose *Tafrihat-e shab* [Nocturnal Pleasures] (1933), *Dar Talash-e Ma'ash* [Straggling to Earn a Living] (1933), *Ashraf-e Makhluhat* [The Noblest of Creatures] (1934), and *Golha-i ke dar Jahannam Miruyand* [Flowers That Sprout in Hell] (1943), with their atmospheric grimness, “made a stir by openly exposing the frustrations of the educated classes and urban civil servants with a mixture of humor and tragedy.”⁵³

The Social Novelist:

The 20th century could also be marked as the era of two new literary genres, namely, the short story and the novel. As Kamshad states, in this period, “deep-rooted political, social, and religious traditions were either being obliterated or else seen the shock of impact with modern Western institution and theories.”⁵⁴ Novels primarily describing social conditions, influenced by the literary naturalism of European novelists like Emile Zola (1840-1902), appeared in quick succession, with woman and city as their two major themes.⁵⁵ The betrayed ideologies of the Constitutional movement were well-represented in the versified drama *Ide'al-e Pir-mard-e Dehghan* [The old Peasant's Ideal Wish] (1924), by Mirzadeh Eshghi (1894-1924) and generated a recurrent theme in the

⁵³ Yarshater, *Az Saba ta Nima*, 1988, pp 34-38.

⁵⁴ Kamshad; *Az Saba ta Nima*, 1966, pp 83-84.

⁵⁵ Meskub; *Ibid*, p 90.

fiction of this period that highlighted a juxtaposition of the city and the village as the stereotyped target by the forces of modernity.

It is for this reason that many literary critics and scholars have categorized Mahmud's works as Socialist Realism⁵⁶ literature, a form of writing that had its roots in neoclassicism and the traditions of realism in 19th century Russian literature.⁵⁷ In other words, for this group of writers the art of writing, simply, attempted to describe the life of simple people at the grassroots level. The writer feels a literary commitment and an obligation to his society, and therefore, he believes his writing should reach beyond aesthetics by instead serving a purpose, a concept primarily exemplified by the aesthetic philosophy of Maxim Gorky.⁵⁸

With the emergence of the new phenomena in Iran in the 19th century, such as historical and fictional novels, literary magazines and newspapers, and the rise of literacy, more and more Iranian novelists and poets felt the need to construct a new literary diction as a critical element toward the modernization of literature. Their society was rapidly changing, and these intellectuals and writers felt that their diction and the contents of their writings should be reflective of their time. This demand for change was felt even more in the poetry where form, not content, was the key to the composition of a poem, and the language was bound to the tight-structured verse form of *ghazal* (sonnet),

⁵⁶ Socialist realism is a teleologically-oriented style of realistic art which has as its purpose the furtherance of the goals of socialism and communism. Although related, it should not be confused with social realism, a type of art that realistically depicts subjects of social concern. (Wikipedia.org)

⁵⁷ Dominated mainly by authors such as Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Anton Chekhov, Pushkin, Gogol, and Gorky.

⁵⁸ Maxim Gorky (1868- 1936) was a Russian/Soviet novelist and founder of the socialist realism literary method and a political activist.

ghasideh (ode), and *rubaiyat* (quatrains) customary to the traditional poetry. The effects of this inevitable change are reflected in the works of the pioneer poets of the 19th century, like Iraj Mirza,⁵⁹ Aref Qazvini,⁶⁰ and Mirzadeh Eshghi.⁶¹ As a result of the efforts for change in the language, breaking the traditional form and offering new content, a new movement emerged both in the Persian prose and poetry. Many scholars and critics owe the establishment of this movement, the rise of modern Persian poetry, to the groundbreaking poetry of Nima Yushij,⁶² who was successful in breaking the traditional form of poetry and allowed many poets of later generations to explore and experiment with this free style of poetry and natural figures of speech.⁶³

As with Iranian fiction, where subjects and literary trends were innovative approaches of writers like Jamalzadeh,⁶⁴ Jalal Al-e Ahmad, and Ahmad Mahmud toward crafting their works in a nonconventional and modern language that reflected their society, the modern Iranian poets also made use of these innovative approaches to articulate their personal views on the conditions of their surroundings. Many modern

⁵⁹ Prince Iraj Mirza (1874–1926) (titled Jalāl-ol-Mamālek, was a famous Iranian poet whose works are associated with the criticism of traditions.

⁶⁰ Abolqassem Aref Qazvini (Persian: ابوالقاسم عارف قزوینی, 1882-1934) was an Iranian poet, lyricist, and musician.

⁶¹ Mirzadeh Eshghi or Eshqi (Persian: میرزاده عشقی), born Sayed Mohammad Reza Kordestani (1893-1924), was a political writer and poet.

⁶² Nima Yushij (Persian: نیرما یوشیج) (1896-1960) also called Nima (نیرما), born Ali Esfandiāri (علی اسفندیاری), was a contemporary Persian poet who started the she'r-e now (شعر نو, "new poetry") also known as she'r-e nimaa'i (شعر نیمایی, "Nimaic poetry") trend in Iran. He is considered as the father of modern Persian poetry.

⁶³ Hakkak, Karimi.

⁶⁴ Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh (Persian: محمد علی جمالزاده) (1892-1997) was one of the most prominent writers of Iran in the 20th century, best known for his unique style of humor. He is often referred to as the “founder of the Persian short story genre” in Iran.

Iranian poets, like Sohrab Sepehri,⁶⁵ Shamlu,⁶⁶ Akhavan-Sales,⁶⁷ and Nader Naderpour,⁶⁸ followed in the footsteps of Yushij, writing their poems in a descriptive and narrative form, relating their personal moods and viewpoints and using their familiar habitat as the backdrop of their poetry.

Ahmad Shamlu, for instance, offered a different outlook in his poetry, at times very much politicized. Like Ahmad Mahmud, belonging to the generation of committed writers who thought their art should question the status quo and contribute to social justice and the betterment of their society, Shamlou also wrote sentimental, lyrical, and patriotic prose poems. In the footstep of Nima Yushij, he abandoned the Persian classics of rhythm and rhyme and offered a natural music and tone to his modern poetry. As witnessed in the writings of Mahmud, politics and attention to social changes are characteristics of Shamlu's poetic identity. Like Ahmad Mahmud, whose prose emotes politic and social critic, Mahmud Kianush⁶⁹ began his own experiments in forms, meters, and rhymes inspired by the modern yet politicized poetry of his time. He employs strong poetic imagery, drawn from nature, his scrounging, and the current events in his society and elsewhere in the world, to grasp the nature of life and man better.

⁶⁵(1928-1980), Sepehri, both a poet and a painter, is considered one of the five most famous modern Iranian poets, who have practiced "New Poetry," a kind of poetry that often has neither meter nor rhyme.

⁶⁶ Also written as "Shamloo" or "Shamlou" and known under his pen name "A. Bamdad (Persian: بامداد) (1925- 2000) was an Iranian poet, writer, and journalist. He is arguably the most influential poet of modern Persian poetry whose poems were influenced by Nima Yushij. Shamlu's poetry is complex, yet his imagery, which contributes significantly to the intensity of his poems, is simple.

⁶⁷ Mehdi Akhavan-Sāles (1928-1090), pen name M. Omid (امید), Hope) was a prominent Iranian poet. He is one of the pioneers of Free Verse (New Style Poetry) in Persian language.

⁶⁸ Nader Naderpour (1929- 2000) was one of the Iranian poets, who shaped up the New Persian Poetry.

⁶⁹ (b.1934), Kianush is a contemporary Iranian poet, short story writer, and scholar.

In general, the modern Persian poet either completely abandons the classical form or, still influenced by the poetry of Hafez⁷⁰ and Mowlavi,⁷¹ he/she tries to adopt the traditional form in order to express a new concept. Using simple, lyrical language, and mostly inspired by the political and social atmosphere, the modern poet continues to find a synthesis between the classical poetry of Hafez, the innovative poetry of Nima Yushij or Ahmad Shamlou, or perhaps a combination of all three poets.

Due to the censorship of the time, the urge to instill a political tone in most Persian novels continued to be present, yet instead of factual details about the glories of pre-Islamic Iran as in the historical novels mentioned before, the themes now revolved around the social conditions in Iran. The 1940s marked a rare and short-lived period of freedom of expression in Iran when political and literary activities flourished. This period also witnessed gradual changes and shifts in literary and linguistic preferences. Writers from the Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries became increasingly popular. The gradual shift from preoccupation with story line and content (as in Jamalzadeh's works) to formal sophistication and internal coherence (as in Hedayat's

⁷⁰ Khājeh Shams o Dīn Mohammad Hāfez-e Shīrāzī (Persian: *خواجہ شمس دین محمد حافظ شیرازی*), known by his pen name Hāfez (1315/1317–1389/1390), was an Iranian poet. His collected works, composed of series of Persian poetry, called Diwan. His life and poems have been the subject of much analysis, commentary and interpretation, influencing post-fourteenth century Persian writing more than any other author. (Britannia.com/topics/Hafez).

⁷¹ Jalāl ad-Dīn Muḥammad Balkhī (Persian: *جلال‌الدین محمد بلخی*) is mainly known as “Rumi” in the West. He is widely known as Mawlānā/Molānā in Iran, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan, and popularly known as Mevlānā in Turkey. He lived most of his life under the Persianate Seljuq Sultanate of Rum, where he produced his works and died, most likely, in 1273 AD. He was buried in Konya and his shrine became a place of pilgrimage. Following his death, his followers and his son, Sultan Walad, founded the Mevlevi Order, also known as the Order of the Whirling Dervishes, famous for its Sufi dance known as the Sama ceremony. (Wikipedia).

works) found its early representation in the later works of some of the novelists of this generation.

Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh, recognized mainly for his short stories, published his first novel *Dar al-Majjanin* [The Lunatic Asylum] (1942), which depicts the life of an obscure set of characters detained in an asylum. They are not depicted as social types emblematic of different and contradictory forces in the Iranian society of the time, as was the case in the author's earlier stories in *Yak-i Bud Yak-i Nabud* [Once Upon a Time] (1921),⁷² but instead complex individuals hovering in the shifting sands between sanity and madness.⁷³

The early social novel, with its preoccupation with melodramatic plots and its lack of interest in stylistic innovations, however, was soon discarded by a new generation of writers who had begun to experiment with new techniques in the years before the advent of the Second World War. Sadegh Hedayat, acclaimed for both his short stories and novellas, was to have a lasting impact on the course of Persian fiction in this century. His writings cover many genres: short stories, articles on literature, classical Persian poets such as Omar Khayyam, folklore, and translations from French.⁷⁴ Some of his books are included: *Alaviyeh Khanom* [Madam Alaviyeh] (1933); *Buf-e Kur* [The Blind Owl] (1937); *Hajji Agha* (1945). Extensively diverse in their representations of life and humanity, his writings taken together offer a kaleidoscopic view of the 1930s and 1940s

⁷² The publication of this collection of short stories made Jamalzadeh a major figure in the Persian literature.

⁷³ Katouzian, *Ibid*, 1998, pp 4968; Farzaneh, pp 38-46.

⁷⁴ Golbon, *Ibid*, p 1953.

Iranian society. In *Hajji Agha*, for instance, the main character, a satirical portrayal of a greedy, hypocritical, corrupt bazaar man, delves deep into the existing conflict between corrupt tradition and crude modernity. “The Hajji himself embodies all the contradictions of the society at large, becoming the microcosmic symbol of its disparities.”⁷⁵

The same omnipresent voice is also heard in Hedayat’s novella, *The Blind Owl*, whose intricate narrative techniques makes it difficult to locate this work in a specific literary classification. Due to its form, *The Blind Owl* falls into two parts. It is narrated in the first person voice by a lone artist, obsessive with the paintings of an ethereal woman, whose on-and-off haunting image he paints on pen-boxes. In the second part, she is transformed into the woman he marries, and whom he ultimately murders. The ambivalence of the novel gives it a haunting effect that remains with the reader long afterwards. Its influence on Persian fiction can be felt in the writings of later generations of experimental writers like Hushang Golshiri,⁷⁶ Taghi Modarresi,⁷⁷ and Bahram Sadeghi.⁷⁸

Like Hedayat, Bozorg Alavi was also influenced by modern narrative techniques. His collections of prison stories, *Varaq Pareha-ye Zendan* [Scrap Papers from Prison] (1941), is the account of his own imprisonment. Additionally, *Panjah o Se Nafar* [The

⁷⁵ Manafzadeh; Ibid p 57.

⁷⁶ (هوشنگ گلشیری; 1938 - 2000) was an Iranian fiction writer, critic and editor.

⁷⁷ (b. Tehran 1931, d. Baltimore 1997), Persian novelist and psychiatrist who made his literary debut with the publication of his first novel, *Yakolya wa tanhaai-e u* (Yakolya and Her Loneliness, 1955).

⁷⁸ (b. Najafabad, 1942–79) graduated from medical school at Tehran University in 1967. He began publishing stories in 1956 in *Sokhan* magazine.

Fifty-Three] (1942], as well as *Nameha* [The Letters] (1952), set him apart as the first Iranian writer to describe prison life in an objectively realistic manner, thus making a new departure from the classical genre of prison literature (*Habsiyat*). His influence can be detected on later writings of the same genre.⁷⁹ Kamshad states, “Unlike other influential contemporary writers who have a range of literary works, Alavi’s fame rests on only a few compositions. His acclaimed novel, *Chashmhayash* [Her Eyes] (1952), in which ideology, psychoanalysis, and romanticism smoothly blend into a poetical language, is a coherently depicted love story of an artist, who is a key figure of the underground opposition in the last years of Reza Shah’s reign, and an educated woman of aristocratic background. *Her Eyes* caused a considerable stir and enjoyed a wide readership.”⁸⁰

While some writers, such as Rasul Parvizi⁸¹ and Jalal Al Ahmad, preferred traditional narrative techniques and followed a more or less realistic style, a newly-emerged generation, including Gholam Hoseyn Gharib (1923-), author of *Afsaneh-ye Sareban* [The Legend of the Camel Driver] (1948), experimented with surrealism, which had already been introduced into Persian literature by Hedayat. The diversity of literary trends was well manifested in the First Congress of Iranian Writers,⁸² which allowed opposing literary views to be heard. It should be noted that a second wave of novelists,

⁷⁹ Raffat, 2-11.

⁸⁰ Kamshad, 1966, 120.

⁸¹ (1919-77) was satirist and writer, mostly famous for his work, *shalvarha-ye vasleh-dar* [The Patched up Pants].

⁸² Sponsored by the Perso-Soviet Society (Tehran, 1946).

such as Behazin (Mahmud E'temadzadeh),⁸³ Sadegh Chubak,⁸⁴ and Simin Daneshvar, started their literary career in this period, but their most important works appeared after the *coup d'etat* of 1953.

Most books of Mahmud's generation were short. Novellas were in style, and long novels were considered traditional narrative technique, but Mahmud retained his style of writing long, voluminous books rather than short stories. He also insisted that the language of his novels be regional, representing a much different and unknown part of the southern Iranian regions, so that his readers would have an understanding of the culture of this part of the country. Therefore, he often used footnotes to explain the unfamiliar vocabulary used by the southern people of Iran. Mahmud's dexterous style of preserving the local color and regional dialects and accents, even the occasional use of incorrect pronunciation of the English words and phrases spoken on the streets, offers the reader a close-up look at the various people who came to this oil-rich part of the country in search of occupations and a better life. Not only are the southern traditions put on display in many of Mahmud's works, but also he has given identity and voice to the common, ordinary people, especially the oil refinery and factory workers, the local fishermen, the battered women, the hopeless and the destitute. Unlike Hedayat and Chubak, who came from the aristocratic and affluent social class but were able to make use of their exceptional innovative, artistic approach to illustrate a class other than the

⁸³ (1915–2006) is an Iranian writer and translator.

⁸⁴ (1916-1998), was an author of short fiction, drama, novels, and one of the leading 20th century writers of Iran.

one they came from, Mahmud was from the depth of the class he wrote about. He was from the south, he knew the south, he lived among the working class, and he felt the poverty and misfortune of his class, so he represented this class in his writings.

Furthermore, due to the censorship and fear of the SAVAK,⁸⁵ many writers could not freely express their political views. Mahmud, on the other hand, did not believe in self-censorship and is considered one of the most candid writers who wrote with a sharp pen. His stories are filled with the issues of imprisonment, poverty, and his direct criticism of a corruptive power. Besides his political view, his depiction of prostitution, mistreatment of women, the destitute, the helpless, and an impoverished working class, is his main focus in his writings.

The Second Generation Writers (1953-1979)

The period of the Second Generation writers falls between two momentous historical events, the *coup d'etat* of 1953, which overthrew the democratically elected government of the Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh, and the 1979 Islamic Revolution, ending the Pahlavi era. This period is marked by tumultuous literary and cultural transformations. During this period, works of form-conscious American novelists, such as Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, and William Faulkner, were translated into Persian. In addition, much admired French writers, especially Albert

⁸⁵ SAVAK stands for Organization of Intelligence and National Security, which was the domestic security and intelligence service (secret police) established by Mohammad Reza Shah with the help of the United States' Central Intelligence Agency (the CIA). SAVAK operated from 1957 to 1979, when the Pahlavi regime was overthrown. (Library of Congress Country Studies. Retrieved February 21, 2011).

Camus⁸⁶ and Jean Paul Sartre,⁸⁷ were also influential, particularly for their treatment of the relationship between politics, philosophy, and literature, albeit from different standpoints. The first part of the period, mainly 1953-1963, witnessed the rise of a new literary genre by those writers whose political ideals had been betrayed. This decade is generally remembered as a decade of disappointments and regrets. The aggressive social criticism of earlier years was replaced by self-criticism and introverted romanticism. The period as a whole was marked by two dominant and conflicting literary trends: populism⁸⁸ and modernism. Modernist writers, discarding the boundaries of social realism, predominantly populist in nature, pushed to redefine then current concepts of literary commitment.

New themes also were introduced. Sadegh Chubak, for instance, chose his protagonists among the lower socio-economic status people and gave their ordinary and dull lives a sense of grim dignity. According to many critics, he was the first writer of this generation to employ the full potential of the dialogue as a narrative technique. Better known for his short stories, Chubak penned two novels, *Tangsir*⁸⁹ and *Sang-e Sabur* [The Patient Stone] (1966).⁹⁰ *Tangsir*, arguably Chubak's best work in his social realist phase, deals with the life story of a southern man from Tangestan, who is a victim

⁸⁶ Albert Camus (1913-1960) was a French Pied-Noir author, journalist, and philosopher. His views contributed to the rise of the philosophy known as "absurdism."

⁸⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre (1905- 1980) was a French existentialist philosopher, playwright, novelist, screenwriter, political activist, biographer, and literary critic. He was one of the key figures in the philosophy of existentialism, and one of the leading figures in 20th century French philosophy and Marxism.

⁸⁸ A discourse which claims to support "the people" versus "the elites".

⁸⁹ (1963); tr. F. R. C. Bagley and Marziya Sami'i as "One Man and His Gun" in Sadegh Chubak: An Anthology. Delmar, N. Y., 1982.

⁹⁰ (1966); tr. M. R. Ghanoonparvar as "The Patient Stone", Costa Mesa, Calif., 1989.

of injustice and decides to take matters into his own hands, kills those who violated his rights, and as a result becomes a local hero. With *The Patient Stone*, however, in which the techniques of stream of consciousness and interior monologue are used to delve into the inner thoughts of the characters, Chubak takes a more naturalistic stand to portray the disturbed mind of a religious serial killer, obsessed with murdering women he perceives as being morally corrupt.⁹¹

Among the second generation of writers primarily concerned with social and political issues, Jalal Al-e Ahmad is a central figure. Al-e Ahmad's writings are mainly concerned with questions of social justice, intellectual and religious life, economic transformation, sense of alienation, and cultural colonialism. He experimented with various types of narrative: polemical essays, travelogues, ethnographic reports, autobiography, and works of fiction.⁹² In addition to short stories, he wrote three novels: *Modir-e Madreseh* [The School Principal] (1974),⁹³ *Nun val-Ghalam* [By the Pen] (1961),⁹⁴ and *Nefirin-e Zamin* [The Curse of the Land] (1966), Al-e Ahmad's lengthiest narrative. In all of these three books, as well as in most of Al-e Ahmad's works, the author assumes the role of social critic and hopes to reform his society. His dramatization of the circumstances of village life in *The Curse of the Land* was later developed into a recurrent motif and appeared in the works of many novelists who

⁹¹ Barāheni, 1969, 696-741.

⁹² Dabbāshi, 21-22.

⁹³ (1958); tr. J. K. Newton as "The School Principal", Minneapolis, 1974.

⁹⁴ (1961); tr. M.R. Ghanoonparvar as "By the Pen", Austin, Tex., 1988.

succeeded him.⁹⁵

The publication of yet another Iranian writer, Ali-Mohammad Afghani's (1925-?) monumental novel of social realism, over eight hundred pages long, entitled *Showhar-e Ahu Khanom* [Ahu Khanom's Husband] (1961), is considered by many critics as a classic of modern Persian fiction. Against the backdrop of a simple town, the novel renders the life of a middle-aged baker who falls in love with an exciting young woman who he takes for his second wife. The triangular relationship, along with the full range of human shortcomings, is depicted with much sympathy and psychological insight.

Many critics find the works of Ebrahim Golestan,⁹⁶ a modernist writer, important due to his use of narrative techniques, linear plots, and cinematic description of scenes and episodes. Golestan made his literary debut with short stories, and his only long narrative is a satirical work under the title of *Asrar-e Ganj-e Darra-ye Jenni* [The Secrets of the Treasure of the Haunted Valley] (1974).

Additionally, Bahram Sadeghi⁹⁷ is praised for not only his several collections of short stories, some tinged with surrealistic humor, but also his short novel *Malakut* [Heavenly Kingdom] (1961) and *Sangar va ghomghomeh-hay khali* [Trench and the Empty Flasks] (1970).⁹⁸ Influenced by psychoanalytical theories both directly and through the influence of Hedayat, *Heavenly Kingdom* remains strikingly original. Sadeghi's characters are mainly frustrated intellectuals who are consumed by anxiety and

⁹⁵ Abedini, 1987-98, II, 64, 111; Mirsadeghi, 632; Yarshater, 1984, 53-55.

⁹⁶ (b. 1922-), Iranian filmmaker and literary figure with a career spanning half a century.

⁹⁷ (1936-83), a modernist Iranian writer.

⁹⁸ Abedini 1987-98, I, 254-5

terror. “In *Heavenly Kingdom*, for example, the two protagonists confront each other like two scorpions engaged in a slow, measured dance of death.”⁹⁹

In the second half of the 20th century, the number of writers proliferated. In 1968, a group of Iranian writers formed an association, Kanun-e Nevisandegan-e Iran [The Association of Iranian Writers], which took the lead in dealing with the problems of censorship and promoting the professional interests of writers.¹⁰⁰ Women novelists like Simin Daneshvar and Mahshid Amirshahi¹⁰¹ also emerged and produced much-admired contemporary literary works, which continued well into the next generation of Post Revolution writers. It was in this period that the novel overtook the short story as the most popular genre of creative fiction.

Unlike the previous generation of historical writers who drew from the glorious past of Iran, the second generation of novelists focused on the immediate past. Thus, modern history became a major theme with writers of this era to draw attention to a plagued present. In Simin Daneshvar’s *Savushun* (1969),¹⁰² the story of a southern landowner family and their opposition to the British colonial forces against the backdrop of Iran’s immediate history during World War II are woven together. The story ends in the murder of the protagonist husband, Yusef, survived by his young pregnant wife, Zari, who is determined to carry on the struggle.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Sepanlu, 1992, 115-17.

¹⁰⁰ Karimi-Hakkak, 1985

¹⁰¹ (b. 1937-)Contemporary Iranian writer

¹⁰² (1969, tr. M. Ghanoonparvar as *Savushun: A Novel About Modern Iran*, Washington, D.C., 1990; tr. R. Zand as *A Persian Requiem*, New York, 1991)

¹⁰³ (Milani, 1992, 11)

Among the writers of this era, writers like Ahmad Mahmud, Iraj Pezeshkzad,¹⁰⁴ Jamal Mirsadeghi,¹⁰⁵ Esma'il Fasih,¹⁰⁶ and Hushang Golshiri should be mentioned. Primarily a short story writer, Jamal Mirsadeghi is the author of several books on literary criticism and an advocate of realism and political activism, who began his literary career by writing for the literary journal, *Sokhan*. In his writings, he portrays the deprived and subjugated characters. Mirsadeghi's most significant novel is *Badha Khabar az Taghyir-e Fasl Midahand* [The Winds Announce a Change of Season] (1984), which depicts the lives and development of a number of friends from low-income families, their marriages, parental care, and above all the abuses of an autocratic regime. Yarshater called it "a major novel of the period and a highly accomplished one in terms of its construction and economy."¹⁰⁷ Among Mirsadeghi's other novels are *Shab-Cherag* [The Glittering Gem] (1976), and *Atash az Atash* [Fire from Fire] (1985).

The Mosaddegh era, the aftermath of the 1953 coup, and later the period of the Iran-Iraq War are the subjects of Ahmad Mahmud's historical trilogy: *The Neighbors*, *The Tale of a City*, and *The Scorched Land*. Mostafa Rahimi (b. 1925) also depicts the historical environment departed from the previous regimes in his *Bayad Zendegi Kard* [Life Must Go On] (1977). The historical background of the popular comic novel by Iraj Pezeshkzad, *Da'i jan Napel'eon* [My Uncle Napoleon] (1964),¹⁰⁸ is also the depiction of

¹⁰⁴ ایرج پزeshkzاد (b.1928) is an Iranian writer and author of the famous Persian novel *Da'i Jan Napoleon* (Dear Uncle Napoleon, translated as *My Uncle Napoleon*) published in the early 1970s.

¹⁰⁵ جمال میرصادقی (b. 1933) is an Iranian writer and critic.

¹⁰⁶ (b. 1935-) is an active novelist and short-story writer.

¹⁰⁷ (1986, p. 292).

¹⁰⁸ Translated in English by Dick Davis. (Washington, D. C., 1996).

the post WWII years, a time of crucial changes in the social and political structure of Iran. The story revolves around the life of the narrator's uncle, a cynical figure, humorously named *Da'i Jan Napel'eon*, who believes everything happens at the conspiratorial hands of the British.

In addition, the writings of Hushang Golshiri are notable due to their complex structure, intricate language, and skillful use of stream of consciousness narration.¹⁰⁹ *Shazdeh Ehtejab* [The Prince Ehtejab],¹¹⁰ Golshiri's highly acclaimed novella is a tortured journey of self-realization through the remembrance of things past. In his later works, he attempted to experiment with new narrative techniques which he incorporated more and more in some of his post-revolution works, including *Ayeneha-ye dardar* [Mirrors With Doors] (1992), another journey of self-realization, undertaken this time by an intellectual novelist who travels to different European cities giving readings of the story he is writing.¹¹¹ As Abedini states, "Here again his use of repetition of the same images and actions seen from different angles and perspectives may imply a Sisyphean attempt at capturing the totality of experience, the impossibility of which the writer himself is the first to admit. For him as for many post-modernist writers, the failure itself is a confirmation of the limitations of language and of illusions inherent in the process of

¹⁰⁹ In literature, stream of consciousness writing is a literary device which seeks to portray an individual's point of view by giving the written equivalent of the character's thought processes, either in a loose interior monologue, or in connection to his or her sensory reactions to external occurrences. Stream-of-consciousness writing is strongly associated with the modernist movement. Its introduction in the literary context, transferred from psychology, is attributed to May Sinclair.

¹¹⁰ (1968, tr. M. R. Buffington as "Prince Ehtejab" in Hillmann, ed., 1976, 250-303).

¹¹¹ Kalantari, pp- 30-37; Okhowwat, 244-55.

writing.”¹¹²

Although most of Fasih's novels appeared after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, his strong point is to entwine the history of a city and a nation with the history and development of a single family, whose members reappear in his other novels. Fasih's first novel, *Sharab-e Kham* [Immature Wine] (1966), a detective story, was followed by his most popular novel, *Del-kur* [Blind-Hearted] (1970).

Celebrated by his epic masterpiece, *Kelidar* (published in 10 volumes, 1979-84), a monumental panorama of life in his native Khorasan, Mahmud Dowlatabadi incorporates a variety of elements, rendering it a well-substantiated documentary on the physical, social, and political features of the region and the abuses committed by landlords and government agents. Navvabpur has described it as an “epic of decline,”¹¹³ and Ehsan Yarshater calls it “the greatest novel of the Persian language.”¹¹⁴ Due to his use of poetic descriptions and a rich vocabulary of both regional and archaic words, Dowlatabadi's rhythmic prose achieves the dignity and grandeur of an epic.¹¹⁵ His other works includes *Owsaneh-ye Baba Sobhan* [The Legend of Baba Sobhan] (1968), and *Ja-ye Khali-e Saluch* [The Empty Place of Saluch] (1979).¹¹⁶

The Post-Revolutionary Generation (1979- Present)

During this period, more novels and short stories were written than ever before in

¹¹² Abedini, 1987, 98, II, 275

¹¹³ As Saba ta Nima, 433

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 1987, 1067.

¹¹⁵ ibid, Moayyed, 1988.

¹¹⁶ (German tr. by S. Lotfi as *Der Leere Platz von Solutsch*, Zurich, 1991).

the history of Iran, either by the already established writers prior to the Revolution of 1979 like Golshiri, Fasih, Dowlatabadi, Mirsadeghi, Mahmud, Daneshvar, and Goli Taraghi, or by the emerging writers who started their literary career chiefly after the 1979 Islamic Revolution like Moniru Ravanipur,¹¹⁷ Parsipur,¹¹⁸ and Ma'rufi. The Islamic Revolution of 1979, first regarded by many writers and critics as a “unifying cause creating the possibility of their vision’s fulfillment,”¹¹⁹ and in which most of them took a more or less active part, was marked by a period of silence in literary production. However, fiction, rather than poetry, soon re-emerged as the dominant mode of literary expression, taking advantage of the brief period of relative freedom after the revolution.

The post revolutionary writings consist of a wide range, extending from revolutionary ideals, memoirs dealing with prison, torture, and displacement, and detective stories and family conflicts that mainly served as entertainment. It was also during this period that the genre of magical realism, a narrative mode, which initially appeared in universally acclaimed Latin American novels like those of Isabel Allende and Marquez, found its way in the writings of Iranian regional novelists. In addition, this period marks the establishment of women writers as a powerful literary force with their own concerns and ideologically varied but distinct identities.

Both Ahmad Mahmud and Isma'il Fasih, who were recognized writers, earned immediate acclaim by their post-revolutionary novels. Their stories depict the Iran-Iraq

¹¹⁷ (b. 1954 in Bushehr)

¹¹⁸ (b. 1945) Iranian novelist.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, Karimi-Hakkak, 1991, 513.

war, sense of loss and alienation due to a devastating war. *Sorayya dar Eghma* [Sorayya in Coma] (1983),¹²⁰ for instance, revolves around the chaotic life of the initial Iranian expatriates in Paris. His equally acclaimed second novel, *Zemestan-e Shast o Dow* [The Winter of '62] (1987), was considered to be the first novel on the Iran-Iraq war, which renders the feeling of displacement and sense of loss throughout the country through the eyes of Jalal Arian,¹²¹ one of the familiar protagonists of his novels. Fasih's later novels, such as *Name be Donya* [Letter to the World] (1995), which was published in Washington, also explores themes of war and displacement.

Among the many prolific post-revolutionary writers, there should be mention of Reza Baraheni,¹²² Shahrnush Parsipur, Javad Mojabi,¹²³ Mahshid Amir-Shahi,¹²⁴ and Moniru Ravnipur. Baraheni, literary critic and author, is well known for his novella *Az Chah be Chah* [From One Well to Another] (1983), which deals with the narration of incarceration of a political activist and intellectual in the late Pahlavi era. His other books are *Avaz-e Koshtegan* [The Song of the Slain] (1985), and *Razha-ye Sarzamin-e Man* [Mysteries of My Land] (1987). Parsipur, who had already published her *Sag o Zemestan-e Boland* [The Dog and the Long Winter] (1976), before the revolution, gained instant fame with the publication of *Tuba va Ma'na-ye Shab* [Tuba and the Meaning of the Night] (1988). Generally said, this novel is considered one of the early magic-realist

¹²⁰ 1983, tr. by the author as "Sorayya in a Coma", London, 1985.

¹²¹ Yarshater, 1989.

¹²² (born 1935) is an exiled Iranian novelist, poet, critic and political activist.

¹²³ (b. 1939), جواد مجابی is an Iranian poet, writer, researcher, and literary critic, well known for his novels *Shahrbandan* (Curfew, 1987) and *Shab-e Malakh* (The Night of the Locust, 1990).

¹²⁴ (b. 1940) contemporary Iranian writer

novels in Iran. The story retells the recent history of Iran, entwined with the protagonist Tuba's life and her many eccentric relatives and political figures. In the backdrop, the country undergoes fundamental transformations in the time span between the Constitutional era and the Islamic Revolution of 1979.¹²⁵ One notable topic that repeats itself in Parsipur's stories is the theme of psychological transformation of women, especially in her novels *Zanan Bedun-e Mardan*¹²⁶ [Women Without Men] (1989) and *Aghl-e Abi* [Blue Intellect] (1994). In addition to her novels and short stories, the Persian original of Parsipur's *Khaterat-e Zendan* [Prison Memoirs] was published in Los Angeles in 1996.

Beside the themes of war, sense of displacement, and magical realism, a number of younger emerging writers attempted to make use of their local scenes, customs, and folklore as their main focal point in their stories. Ravanipur's use of "familiarization style of writing," for instance, attracts her readers through a language strongly colored by the author's local dialect and influenced by magical realism. Her stories mainly take place in southern cities such as Bushehr and villages and small towns in the Persian Gulf.¹²⁷ Ravanipur has written several collections of short stories and her two most important novels are *Ahl-e Ghargh* [The People of Drowning] (1989), and *Del-e Fulad* [Heart of Steel] (1990).

Moreover, Asghar Elahi, Naser Mo'azzen, Nasim Khaksar, Mohammad Reza

¹²⁵ Yavari 1989, 13041.

¹²⁶ (1989, tr. By K. Talattof and J. Translated as "Women Without Men" in Middle East Literature in Translation, Syracuse, 1998)

¹²⁷ (Rahimieh, 61-75; Lewis and Yazdanfar, 50; Falaki)

Safdari, Bahram Heydari, and Adnan Ghorayfi are also among the regional writers, whose works are infused by the environment and colors of their locality, providing their readers a wealth of ethnographic information. Furthermore, psychoanalytic concepts and theories, employed by many Iranian novelists in various forms and degrees, found a distinct place in post-revolutionary fiction. Abbas Ma`rufi, a journalist and a writer, has succeeded in constructing points of coincidence between aesthetic and psychic structures in his first and most advanced novel, *Samfoni-e Mordegan* [*Symphony of the Dead*] (1989).¹²⁸ The novel is essentially an innovative adaptation of the story of Cain and Abel and revolves around the life and eventual death of two brothers and their domineering father, in a society undergoing fundamental transformations. According to Yavari, “Ma’rufi utilizes the Freudian model of the encapsulated and superego to create a de-centered structure and to narrate the story, simultaneously, from different points of view.”¹²⁹ The narrative techniques of the novel have been compared to those of some western novelists, most notably Faulkner.¹³⁰

Mohsen Makhmalbaf (b. 1957), a prolific writer of plays and film scripts as well as a cinematographer, was an acclaimed figure among the group of young writers who identified themselves strongly with the Revolution of 1978-79. Besides his short stories and screenplays, he has written two novels, *Howz-e Soltun* [Soltun's pool] (1984),¹³¹ and *Bagh-e Bolur* [The Crystal Garden] (1986), in which most of the characters, although

¹²⁸ (*Symphony of the Dead*, 1989, tr. into German by A. Gharaman-Beck as “*Symphonie der Toten*”, Frankfurt, 1996).

¹²⁹ (Yavari, 1995a).

¹³⁰ (Mahvizani, I, 11-17).

¹³¹ A salt-marsh near the city of Ghom.

from different backgrounds, tend to speak and act solely in the vocabulary and discourse of the ruling religious ideology.

This post revolutionary period continues to furnish the historical background applied in novels such as *Khane-ye Edrisi-ha* [The House of the Edrisis] (1992) by Ghazaleh Alizadeh (1948-1995). This novel consists of four segments and is based on the interplay of geometrical forms, the circle, the square, and the number four, with the story narrated from four different perspectives. Alizadeh attempts to write in a language appropriate to the historical era in which their novels are set, with varying degrees of success. Immediate contemporary history has also been treated by many novelists of this period. Special mention should be made of Simin Daneshvar's autobiographical novel, *Jazireh-ye Sargardani* [The Island of Bewilderment] (1992), which depicts the exhilarating days before the Revolution of 1979. By creating a cast of politically confused and headed toward a future failure characters, the novel takes a critical stand toward underpinning ideologies of the revolution, particularly those advocated by Al-e Ahmad and his followers.¹³²

Fiction writers, primarily women, who wrote mainly for entertainment purposes, also mark the second half of this period. Notable among them is the infinitely popular *Bamdad-e Khomar* [The Morning After] (1996) by Fattaneh Hajj Sayyed Jawadi, which has achieved enormous popularity and has been reprinted many times. The novel depicts the story of two lovers from different socio-economic classes and the ensuing tragic

¹³² Yavari, 1998.

outcome of their mismatched union. As Karimi Hakkak states, “Like some early historical novels, it idealizes a vanishing gentry, but instead of castigating the emerging bourgeoisie as villains, it is the working and lower classes, who are portrayed as ruthlessly rapacious and self-centered.”¹³³ Additionally, serialized detective or love stories have attracted a much wider readership in the 1990s, like the stories by Fahimeh Rahimi and Nasrin Sameni, which have been reprinted several times with runs exceeding ten thousand copies and which are more meaningful to attract of a wider readership than literary ones.¹³⁴ Just like in the Hollywood movies, these stories generally end happily or with forbidden romances.

To sum up, the formation of modern fiction in Iran, which developed from the 19th century to the first decade of the 21st century, has witnessed many historical and literary productions and literary trends that have gone through major shifts in themes and techniques of narration, varying from period to period and likely to continue.

¹³³ Karimi-Hakkak, 1997, 447-70; Dastghayb. 1997, 283-92

¹³⁴ Abedini, 1993.

Chapter Three

Khaled or Iranian Nation

Characterization in Mahmud's Major Works

The transformation of the main character: Khaled/Nation

Generally said, Mahmud's work can be divided into two periods: his early works, which include many of his short stories, and his later works, which include the series of voluminous novels he produced over many years of his writing career. Abdolali Dastghayb, one of the notable critics of Mahmud's novels, believes that Mahmud's early works were influenced by Sadegh Hedayat, and his style of writing is similar to Chubak's style of writing.¹³⁵ He argues, however, that Mahmud very quickly found his own voice and soon his style of writing surpassed the renowned works of Chubak. Dastghayb even goes further by stating that the title of "Iranian Southern Storyteller," which is given to Chubak, should have been given to Mahmud for he is the southern writer who deserves this title.¹³⁶

Characterization in Mahmud's Early Work:

¹³⁵ Abdolali Dastghayb, *Naqd-e Asar-e Ahmad Mahmud*, (Tehran: Mo'in Publisher, 1999), 25-26.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 28

Themes of “escape” and “freedom” are the two overarching and dominant subject matters in Mahmud’s early works, yet other recurring themes such as socio-economical obstacles, abusive sexuality, sexual relationship with young boys, taboo and sexual relationships between the siblings, and opium addiction are also portrayed in his early short stories. The concern of opium addiction, nevertheless, is found in almost all of Mahmud’s stories, in particular in the story of “Antar-e Teryaki,” [The Opium Addict Baboon]. “The Opium Addict Baboon” is a short story that signifies the preoccupation of the author with improper relationships among the poor people and less privileged class of society, who struggle to survive the harsh conditions of everyday life. The wretched and parasitic lives of the characters whose lives depend on others who are miserable themselves yet in a relatively better situation charges Mahmud’s early works. For example, characters like Morad, the main character of “Zaeiri Zir-e Baran,” [A Pilgrim in the Rain] (1967) sells his blood in order to get by another day. Most characters of the early stories consist of hopeless and dejected characters with no particular ambition in life, acceptant of their desperate conditions, no longer have a desire to fight for a better life nor the power to break down the walls of the terrible and mundane lives around them.

The story “The Opium Addict Baboon,” which many critics have compared to Sadegh Chubak’s story “Antari ke Luti-yash Mordeh Bud,” [The Baboon Whose Master Was Dead] (1949) is a sad and cruel story of a baboon who has been deliberately addicted to opium for the purpose of performance and making money, and eventually when his master is dead, is left alone to survive on his own. The unfortunate animal now

loiters around a teahouse, entertaining passersby to collect money, placed on a plate held in his mouth; he gives his earnings to the teahouse-keeper in exchange for a bit of opium. The Baboon then takes his purchase to his “friend” so he will smoke it and blow it into his face, and in this fashion, the Baboon becomes high and temporarily relieved from pain. This tedious routine goes on until one day the “friend” happens not to come to the teahouse, and now, the Baboon, desperate and in a rush of pain, recalling his former owner swallowing the small bits of opium to get high, does the same, but miserably overdoses himself and dies. Days later, his rotting body is found in a back alley, as the people pass by him, shaking their head in sorrow. Everyone is sad to see the wretched animal in such a state of disgrace, everyone except the city clown, who expresses a great deal of joy when he sees the poor animal rotting away, for he has no more competitors.

Another aspect of Mahmud’s writing is the reappearance of many of the characters from his early short stories in his later novels. Characters like the opium addict Khaj Tofiq, Naser Davani, Afaq, Yaddollah Ramzi, Amu Bandar, and many recurring minor characters keep reappearing, sometimes as the same person, other times as new characters, similar only in names to the former ones. As an example, even though Mahmud’s readers get to know young Khaled for the first time in *The Neighbors*, he had laid the foundation of this memorable novel and the creation of this hero character as far back as the short story “Dastan-e Shahr-e Kuchek-e Ma,” [The Tale of Our Little Town]

(1971).¹³⁷ The story unfolds from the point of view of a small boy, later to be known as Khaled, who witnesses the cutting down of the date palm trees by the government and the destruction and demolition of the houses of his childhood neighborhood one by one as the bulldozers pave the way for the emerging oil production companies. The young narrator's father, along with a group of neighborhood men, is determined to fight the foreign power and the oil companies, but his plan is soon discovered, and the entire group gets arrested. Having lost her safe haven, Afaq, Khaj Tofiq's wife, who smuggles in fabrics for the protection of the date palm trees, gets shot by government officials and dies. The narrator's house as well his neighbors' is razed by the oil companies and the city authorities. Many secondary characters including Afaq, Khaj Tofiq, their opium-addict daughter, Banu, and even the young narrator himself, whose great love and pastime is to fly his pigeons, are all characters who the reader will revisit in more details, not only in *The Neighbors* but also in Mahmud's later novels. For instance, the reader is introduced to Amu Bandar, a city sweeper, for the first time in the short story "Chashmandaz" [View], where the inhabitants of a small and unknown town pretend to die in order to add a bit of flavor to their dull and mundane lives. On Amu Bandar's day to pretend to die, he actually dies for real, taking the townspeople by surprise who are not prepared for such reality and don't know how to bury a "really dead" person. The narrator tells the story from behind a see-through curtain covered window as if he is describing a prisoner's visit with a family member. In fact, Mahmud repeated this

¹³⁷ Ahmad Mahmud, "Dastan-e Shahr-e Kuchek-e Ma" from collection of stories *The Little Native Boy* (1971).

specific style of description and storytelling once again in *The Tale of a City*, where the focal point resembles that of a prison in which all the prisoners await their turn to be tortured and condemned to death. Furthermore, the feeling of despair and hopelessness transmits from one person to the next as with a contagious and deadly disease. The line of narration continues and the reader will see more characters transformed that reappear in future stories. One could also assert the same about the story “Az Deltangi,” [From Nostalgia] as the basis for another extensive novel, *The Tale of a City*, where the protagonist, once released from prison, spends his isolated and forlorn days of exile.

When evaluating Mahmud’s works, we can compare his recurring main character, Khaled, to Albert Camus’ main character, Meersault, in *Stranger* (1942) and Quentin in Faulkner’s *Sound and Fury* (1929). Similar to Mahmud’s works where Khaled keeps reappearing, Quentin too reemerges in Faulkner’s various stories although he may appear as a new character. For Mahmud as well as for Camus and Faulkner, the essence of time is significant, the sequence of events shaping the storyline as the transformation of the main characters continues to surface in their novels. The past is always present in their stories, and so are the familiar people and the familiar landscapes. In Mahmud’s case, the people of the south of Iran are the ones whose stories matter and are magnified, and the south is always the backdrop and the repeated focal point.

From early on, Mahmud’s works are also sprinkled with a particular diction colored by the regional idiosyncrasies and idioms. In addition, the characters, mostly southerners, represent their handling of the socio-economical conditions of their time. In

a way, Mahmud is the savior of his own characters. In both “Gharibe-ha,” [The Strangers] (1971) and “Pesarak-e Bumi,” [The Native Boy] (1971), the Boy¹³⁸ admires Ne’mat, who robs the allied forces during World War II only to give his booty to the poor. Ne’mat is the Robin Hood of this story, so to say, who takes from the rich in order to feed the hungry, thus making him the hero of the poor and the story. In the story “Koja Miri Nanneh Amru” [Where are you going, Nanneh Amru] the reader is introduced to the story by an omniscient narrator whose main concern is what has become of Nanneh Amru the night she heard her son was to be hanged. Mahmud may have presented his readers a story in an innovative style, yet at the same time, the story itself may appear to the reader as problematic, for it reads rather like a screenplay than a short story. A second problem that emerges due to this innovative style is that the author’s own voice and opinion is often heard between the lines, as he tends to criticize the socio-political conditions of his time and the religious establishment.

In the story “Tars,” [Fear] the male heroes, Khaled and Yahya, also escape from prison with security guards chasing after them. The fear and terror of prison are the main themes of this story, which Mahmud revisits in his novels. In the story “Rahi be Suy-e Aftab” [A Way to the Sunlight,] the main character, Gholam, who is imprisoned on a murder charge, pretends that he has gone mad. He manages to escape from the train as he is being transferred to a mental asylum, and he soon finds himself free. This linguistically straightforward narrated short story is revisited in *The Neighbors*, and this

¹³⁸ The main character’s name is not mentioned and the reader is introduced to him only as the “Boy.”

time, in a much more elaborate and comical language than the one used in the original story. Vivid descriptions of Gholam's gradual madness and his relationship to his cellmates, his mocking of the prison authorities, his creating comic scenes, his witty hallucinations and hilarious language, all are re-narrated in *The Neighbors*, and this time also through a character named Gholam.¹³⁹

Just like he does with the young protagonist Khaled of *The Neighbors*, Mahmud presents the narrative of "The Strangers" from the point of view of a young boy. Clearly, the author's intentional choice to create a young narrator whose innocent viewpoint and untainted emotions offer the reader an opportunity to see the transformation of the world around him. By making use of flashbacks and roaming back and forth in time, the author creates a set of stories within stories, an innovative and fresh style of writing absent in his former signature linear storytelling.

Characterization in Mahmud's Novels:

The Neighbors: Khaled/Nation

Parallel to the primary themes mentioned earlier as well as other themes such as the transformation of the protagonist, Khaled, the socio-economic developments of a very crucial historical period in the history of Iran comprise the overarching themes of this novel. It is impossible to summarize this work, especially because the author has given

¹³⁹ Ahmad Mahmud, *The Neighbors*, 394-398.

his full attention in creating unforgivable characters and types. For instance, the presence of various characters whose actions and reactions tie them to the main character, Khaled, and help in shaping his understanding of himself, his place in the society, and his political awareness, are all facts which make it even more difficult to summarize this novel. For this reason, I attempt to focus only on the linear line of the story and the development of the internal and external life of the protagonist. Primarily relying on the novel itself in addition to using the examples from his other novels that follow this gradual development, I attempt to analyze and assess this unforgettable and central character's transformation while the nation simultaneously goes through various stages of transformation. Therefore, other less important and lateral characters are mentioned and analyzed only in relation to the main protagonist.

The focal point of the primary narrative is the interior of a "sprawling house"¹⁴⁰ where the lives of various tenants unfold throughout the novel. This rundown house, inhabited by seven distinctive and deprived families, is located in a poor neighborhood at the outskirts of a city.¹⁴¹ From the description of the house itself and its many shabby adjoining rooms, one can imagine the simple, unassuming, and open lives of people who do not try to hide anything from each other. With the exception of a few whimsical and amusing scenes, everyone lives peacefully side by side for the most part, and at times

¹⁴⁰ In an interview with Bahman Maghsoudlou, the director of a documentary on Mahmud's life, Mahmud has referred to this house as "the house of his childhood. "Ahmad Mahmud, The Noble Novelist (2004).

¹⁴¹ Although the name of the city is never mentioned throughout the novel, but from the descriptions provided, particularly the River Karun and the famous White Bridge, the reader can guess that the city is none but Ahvaz.

they are even helpful and supportive of one another. For example, when the narrator's father goes overseas in search of work, and his family is now in need of help, Amu Bandar, another tenant, does not hesitate to lend money to Khaled's mother to make ends meet before her husband returns. The general atmosphere of the house is particularly interesting, especially in the warm summer nights, when the families gather in the courtyard to wind down. What most captures the reader's attention is the sense of smell throughout the novel: the smell of water-sprinkled walls; the pungent smell of Khaj Tofiq's opium, present throughout the story; the smell of Rahim's donkeys as they enter the courtyard; the smell of brick-making kilns; and the smell of the meat-stews of Bolur Khanom. In addition to the sense of smell are the mixed sounds audible throughout this voluminous novel. Sounds like the call for prayers at dawn by Amu Bandar, the sound of Mohammad the Mechanic's constant criticizing of neighbors for their superstitious customs, his ongoing urging of everyone to stand up for their rights and to end the misery, and above all, the sound of Bolur Khanom's yelling and crying as she writhes under the lashing of Aman Aqa's belt, damning all his relatives "dead or alive" - these are the incessant sounds we hear most often throughout the novel.

Shortly after the introduction of this first layer of the storyline, the reader is introduced to the secondary storyline against the backdrop of the social-political events shaped by the atmosphere of a tumultuous era, events which reflect the uprisings and the people's struggle for nationalization of the oil industry under the democratic government

of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossaddeq.¹⁴² For this reason, most critics have categorized this novel as a “historical novel” that reveals the turmoil of a country in transition in the 1950s. The narrative is a work of social criticism, and as Ojakians states, this is a novel “at times journalistic and informative, conveying perhaps the author’s message in the folds of the story and between the lines.”¹⁴³

In this widely read controversial novel, the reader witnesses the main character, Khaled, a fourteen (or fifteen year old) boy, who due to circumstances is transformed from a carefree, uneducated boy into a curious, alert, and self-sacrificial young man who stands up for his newly found ideals. The reader also witnesses his transformation from childhood to adulthood as he breaks away from his poor neighborhood, joins the group of educated, revolutionary students, gets arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and released only to serve his mandatory military service. The secondary characters mostly consist of the oil refinery workers, tanker drivers, shopkeepers, fishermen, teahouse owners, and common trades-people. There are also two other groups of people that Mahmud distinguishes particularly. On one hand, there are students, intellectuals, bookstore owners, and revolutionaries, and on the other hand, there are military personnel and government officials, torturers, spies, and moles.

¹⁴² Mohammad Mosaddegh or Mosaddeq (1882-1967), was the democratically elected Prime Minister of Iran from 1951 to 1953 when his government was overthrown in a *coup d'etat* orchestrated by the British government and the CIA.

¹⁴³ Ojakians, Anahid, *A Critique of the Fiction of Esmail Fasih, and stories by Ahmad Mahmud, Zoya Pirzad, Amir Hossein Chegeltan and Fatteneh Haj Seyed Javadi* (Vol. Supplement No. 30), (Tehran: Farhangestan-e zaban va adab-e Farsi, 2007), 142-149.

The turbulent historical changes of the time are especially ripe to shape Khaled's awareness and his intellectual growth. He is the product of an impoverished society. He has lived in poverty himself and has experienced the existing deficiencies and social malfunction in his own home. He has witnessed how the growing new industry has wiped out the traditional blacksmith small business of his father, leaving his father spending his idle days, sitting in his shop empty of customers. He has grasped this sudden clash of tradition and modernity in the lamentation of his father "These days, even the nails are imported from abroad."¹⁴⁴ He has witnessed, of course, his father giving up hope, selling his only valuable belonging, his West End Watch, for a meager amount, so that he could make some money, pack up his suitcase, and in the footsteps of many of the men around him, head out for Kuwait City to become a laborer, with the hope of providing for his family from afar.

Beside the external transformation, Khaled has to deal with his internal transformation, finding himself in love with the beautiful young girl "Black-Eyed," a girl from an upper class family. Not only is she unlike the girls from his neighborhood, but Khaled is also clearly aware of the gap between his own economic class and hers. Nonetheless, he is too young and in love to pay too much attention to these sorts of questions. He knows his place in the society, but he also knows how to break these boundaries; in fact, he is determined to break these boundaries. According to Jalali, a contemporary critic of Mahmud's works, the weak point of *The Neighbors* is that

¹⁴⁴Ahmad Mahmud, *The Neighbors*, 20.

Mahmud gives all the answers before the reader has time to wonder. For instance, he has introduced Black-Eyed and soon has set Ali the Devil on Khaled's way, who is shortly off to prison afterward, thus the end of a romantic chapter for the less curious reader. Quickly, Mahmud started a new chapter that deals with familiar issues, such as prison and torture.¹⁴⁵ Jalali suggests that what Mahmud should have done instead was to create some doubt and let the reader wonder where this relationship would go before ending this romantic chapter so hurriedly. Although Jalali makes a valid point with regard to this issue, one should also bear in mind the school of thought of "social realism," which Mahmud adhered to and chose to continue to be faithful in his realist style of writing, depicting things as they happen in real life. Evidently, this is a relationship that most likely would not survive in real life and would not have the chance to be nourished and grow into something significant. Therefore, we can hypostasize that Mahmud succeeds in showing the progress of Khaled's mental and emotional development, his doubts, and his promises made and even broken.

With this new experience of love for Black-Eyed, Khaled begins to regret his indiscretions with her next-door neighbor, the seductive Bolur Khanom, whose husband, Aman Aqa, abuses her every opportunity he gets. Aman Aqa spends his days at the teahouse and most of his nights in the small room behind the teahouse, where he freely brings in various prostitutes. Bolur Khanom, young and provocative, lures Khaled into a secret sexual relationship, to satisfy her own unrequited desires. Although in some of the

¹⁴⁵ Jalali, F. *Baran bar Zamin-e Sukhteh*, 89.

criticism, Bolur Khanom is portrayed as a “prostitute,” she has no desire to have any sexual relationship with other men. She is a woman confined to the house, and her only exposure to the outside world is going to the market to buy groceries and prepare dinner for Aman Aqa. She, too, appears to have experienced love for the first time, only at an older age, with this young boy, Khaled. Her desire for Khaled is rather a woman’s desire for a man, and not any man, for there are men like Gholam, Khaled’s cousin, whose intention in coming to visit Khaled is obviously to seduce Bolur Khanom. She is not even like Rezvan, Rahim the Donkey-Keeper’s coquettish and lustful wife, who lures the men she encounters in the market as various scenes suggest.¹⁴⁶ Nor is she like Banu, who at the beginning of the story persuades Khaled to swim together in the fishpond so that she can make out with him. The reader soon gets a chance to watch Banu carry out the same fixation with other characters such as Ebram and later with Karam, whom she ends up marrying. Bolur Khanom is indeed a unique character and one of the most unforgettable characters in modern Iranian fiction.

To reiterate Khaled’s personal growth, it is his very first experience with the law that shapes his transformation and his new awareness of his surroundings. As he comes in contact with the unjust government officials and the unfair police, the corrupt local authorities, all these new encounters will change his life and destiny forever. These initial experiences become a turning point for Khaled as they cause him to step on a path of getting involved with the underground political factions. Although he lacks political

¹⁴⁶ Ahmad Mahmud, *The Neighbors*, 242-246.

maturity or understanding, something he is sure of is his sense of justice, his caring concern for the exploited poor, his hatred for corrupt power, and the hypocrites who deceive people. It is through these raw and susceptible experiences of being arrested, being imprisoned, afflicted with physical and psychological torture, being in solitary confinement, and meeting many men from all walks of life that he comes to a deep understanding of who he is and how to stand up for his ideals. He only has to make a conscious choice.

Indeed Khaled is a young boy who despite his tender age is curious and pays close attention to his various neighbors, and although the novel is not narrated from the omniscient point of view, the sharp eyes of Khaled capture every detail of what is happening in the house. He reveals exclusive secrets in which he himself takes part in. Being at the peak of his sexual development, he gives in to seductive Bolur Khanom. Perhaps the presence of the graphic scenes rendered throughout the novel is why critics consider Mahmud as one of the boldest Iranian fiction writers.

Nevertheless, the carefree and mischievous life of Khaled comes to an abrupt end as adolescent Khaled is summoned to the local police station for a crime that he has not even committed. Inadvertently, he hears the voice of another person in custody, who the reader soon meets as the spirited Pendar, from behind a hole in the door, urging Khaled to deliver a message to a bookstore owner by the name of Shafaq. The young narrator, who has no formal schooling due to the fact that his father has accepted the neighborhood's cleric's suggestion to stop his son from going to school at fourth grade, is now meeting

college educated, well-spoken and well-mannered young men like Pendar and Shafaq. He is impressed by this group of young intellectuals, and gradually, he becomes involved with them to the point of carrying out an underground mission without him fully understanding the extent of their political views. Even though he lacks the necessary political maturity, he still believes that they are fighting for a good cause. In contrast to the young boys of his neighborhood like Ebram and Chinuq, Khaled welcomes this association with these intellectuals, even though he feels the danger involved. The time could not be riper to intensify his growing curiosity. Everywhere around him, people begin to talk openly about the nationalization of the oil industry; they wear written slogans such as “The oil industry must be nationalized,” on the “white band sewn onto the shirts of oil refinery workers, tanker drivers, and even high school students.”¹⁴⁷ Shafaq’s faction, along with other political factions, are busy setting up clandestine meetings and handing out flyers and underground newspapers to inform the public and conjure the feeling of dissent against the British oppressors.¹⁴⁸

Khaled, who is quickly given the responsibility of distributing the flyers under the people’s house doors, is followed relentlessly by “Ali the Devil.” Ali the Devil, who is a secret agent, tries at first to lure Khaled into cooperating with the secret police, SAVAK, and to have him reveal the identity of his comrades in exchange for a secure job, making money, and of course his friendship. Khaled, resenting Ali the Devil even more, refuses to cooperate with him and eventually is arrested as he decides to leave his hideout place

¹⁴⁷ *The Neighbors*, 170.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 178-179.

in hope of meeting with his beloved Black-Eyed. He is tortured and thrown in the solitary confinement for many months despite Ali the Devil's continued efforts to convince him to betray his friends in order to buy his freedom. Mahmud revisits the issue of "betrayal" and "being a traitor" and "making a conscious choice" many times in his following novels in various ways, at times angrily, and at other times with understanding and sympathy. During his imprisonment, Khaled, along with many of his cellmates, who unlike him are serving time on criminal charges such as murder and robbery, befriends an inmate, Naser Abadi. Nasser Abadi, condemned to life imprisonment, is arrested for honor killing, murdering his sister who has run away with her lover. Meanwhile, Khaled's secret communication continues with the outside world through comrades like Shafaq and Bidar. It is in prison that once again he meets Pendar, the young man he took a message to Shafaq. Together, they are determined to carry out a strike in prison, demanding the improvement of the prison food and the general conditions. Sadly, the strike is crushed brutally by the prison guards, and Naser Abadi ends up being killed by the guards although this detail is not clear due to the absence of the narrator who is removed from the general ward. Completely isolated in solitary confinement for three months, the narrator is released only to be taken to the mandatory military service instead. The reader will follow him later in *The Tale of a City*, where young Khaled is forced to exile and spends three years of his life in a small port town, Bandar Lengeh, in the Persian Gulf.

The Reappearance of the Characters in Mahmud's Major Works

Although critics like Dastghayb and Golshiri¹⁴⁹ have categorized Mahmud's three major novels *The Neighbors*, *The Tale of a City*, and *The Scorched Land* as a saga, one can posit, by reading all Mahmud's novels as well as a handful of his short stories that all Mahmud's novels are connected together, and each is a continuation of the one before. Other critics have called these three novels a trilogy where the reader witnesses the character's transformation and growth. Looking at Mahmud's major works, however, from the first to the last, *The Fig Tree of Temples*, share the same theme and direction. Despite their autonomy, the skeletal foundation is practically following the same line that connects the stories. Faramarz Azarpad, the protagonist of *The Fig Tree of Temples*, is no exception; he is the extension of young Khaled the protagonist of *The Neighbors* and Baran one of the main characters of *The Scorched Land*. In his final novel, the reader can trace the footprints of the two previous characters and finds their reflection on Nozar Esfandiari. The same fundamental issue applies to *The Scorched Land*, where although there is a character named Khaled, he is the younger brother who Mahmud seems to be reluctant to mention his name.

To be specific, even the narration of the above-mentioned novels is told in the first-person point of view. In other words, the reader witnesses Khaled's initial transformation in the first novel, *The Neighbors*, and his further transformation as he enters into a microcosm of a tumultuous adulthood in the following novels, *The Tale of a*

¹⁴⁹ Ahmad Aghai, *Bidardelan dar Ayeneh: Mo'arefi va Naghd-e Asar-e Ahmad Mahmud* (Tehran: Behnegar Publisher, 2004), 41.

City, The Scorched Land, Zero Degree Latitude, and even in Mahmud's final novel, *The Fig Tree of Temples*.

In *The Tale of a City*, it is again the very hero of *The Neighbors*, young Khaled, who reappears and recalls his political past, as he is condemned to exile in Bandar Lengeh. Nevertheless, with an existing gap of time which seems to be almost a decade, the storyline is told in a linear narrative, but the narrator of this novel is about twenty five years of age and not the same eighteen year old Khaled of the past. Despite the fact that his name is mentioned in passing, only twice to be precise, and despite the gap in time, the reader knows that the character is the adult version of adolescent Khaled. There are, of course, dissimilarities to Khaled of *The Neighbors*, who hardly had any schooling, while the narrator of *The Tale of a City* is an officer whose civil liberties are taken away from him due to his political activities and is demoted now to a simple soldier who passively kills the days of exile. Additionally, that vibrant, curious, energetic young boy searching for an answer has this time been replaced by a passive, disappointed, nostalgic young man who passes his days sleeping in and his nights drinking. Just like the nation in the aftermath of the *coup d'etat* of 1953 living in an era of suffocating oppression and isolation, shifting away from a stillborn democracy, and entering into a rapid transition of becoming a totalitarianism, Khaled too falls deeper and deeper into a self-destructing nothingness. All the heroes are either killed or put behind the bars, the ideals are abandoned, the leaders' voices are muffled, and ironically the people's prime minister,

Mossaddeq, is also exiled in his own house, watching the country take steps towards becoming a totalitarianism.¹⁵⁰

Soon after, the reader follows the young narrator in the next novel *The Scorched Land*, this time, however, as the brother of the narrator. The reader finds out this detail in passing through a letter he writes to his brother, mentioning his name. In reality, it is the same protagonist of the past novels, who writes the stories. Just as in the novel *The Tale of a City*, once again there is a gap in time, and the narrator, now much older, is preoccupied with his report on the war. It is necessary to note that, even before this novel, the main character makes his reappearance in the short story “Bazgasht” [The Return] (1970), as he returns home to witness a great change taken place not only in his city but also in his entire neighborhood and his own family. The collection of short stories, *Didar* [The Visit] (1990), contains two short stories and a longer story titled “The Return.” Shortly after its publication in Persian, “The Return” was translated into German as an independent novella.¹⁵¹ What distinguishes this collection from most of Mahmud’s works is the style of writing almost nonexistent in the writer’s former unembellished and straightforward narration, which Mahmud’s readership were used to and, perhaps, attracted. The story, as confusing as it may appear at first, quickly captures the readers by allowing them enter the internal thoughts of the main character and to fathom his obscure monologue as the narrator himself experiences. The narrator,

¹⁵⁰ The coup is commonly referred to as 28 Mordad 1332 coup in Iran on the Iranian calendar. Mosaddegh was imprisoned for three years, then put under house arrest until his death.

¹⁵¹ Translated as *Die Rückkehr* by Sabine Allafi, (Germany: Clare Publisher, 1997).

Goshtasb,¹⁵² who is again no one but young Khaled of *The Neighbors*, although changed and aged, is released from exile from the same sleepy and remote town of Bandar Lengeh. The author, however, does not preoccupy himself with the details of his imprisonment, and he simply refers his readers to the past novels. As far as the author considers it, he appears to direct his curious readers to his earlier stories as he has introduced the characters already. The author tends to do the same by not revealing the identity of Khaled directly. The narrator, Khaled who has already spent five years of his life away from his family, friends, comrades, and his beloved city, Ahvaz, returns home to see everything changed and that the former comrades are today's traitors not to be trusted. His small city, now transformed, is bustling with the spread of new oil companies and prospective banks and investors. Everyone around him is sucked into this new notion of "modernity" and "money making" promoted by the Shah's regime.¹⁵³ More and more, the narrator finds himself perplexed and utterly hopeless. Unable to adapt to the new situation and find himself a suitable job so that he does not have to compromise his ideals and principles, he seeks solitude and often reflects on a past that exists only in his memory.

As mentioned before, this fresh and rather atypical style of writing is rarely seen in Mahmud's works. Here, Mahmud uses the omniscient point of view, which at times

¹⁵² At various times, names such as Shasb also has been given.

¹⁵³ Here Mahmud refers to Mohammad Reza Shah's "The White Revolution (Enghelāb-e Sefid) a name attributed to the fact it was bloodless and represented a series of reforms in Iran launched in 1963. Mohammad Reza Shah's reform program was built, allegedly, to strengthen those classes that supported the traditional system. The Shah advertised the White Revolution as a step towards westernization, but there is little doubt that he also had political motives.

seems problematic since the narrator goes beyond his ability of knowing the intentions of other characters and even interferes with their thoughts as he maintains dialogues with the characters and expresses sympathy for them. Oftentimes, he is curious about their wellbeing and even suggests solutions for their problems and financial difficulties.

The Tale of a City

The Tale of a City was first published in 1981, almost a decade after Mahmud's first novel, *The Neighbors*. The story begins with the protagonist's monologue, as he leans against the wall of the city's mortuary, looking at the ominous graveyard spread open before him. Past the graveyard lies the vast Persian Gulf in the horizon. This imagery alone is enough to signal the reader to expect a gloomy storyline. The narrator listens to the sound of the singing of fishermen returning from the sea, as he ignores the fierce orders of Sergeant Ghanem. As usual, the vivid elements of nature, the southern landscape, and the blazing sun beating down on the scorched land are very much present in this novel. As in the past novels, the "I" is the narrator, and once again, the author chooses to establish a direct dialogue with his readers as it is his customary style of writing. As the narrator watches Ali's body cleansed by the mortuary's attendant, the reader knows that something horrible is at stake and is already intrigued by who Ali is and why he is dead. The reader, however, has to wait until the end of the story to find out why since this is a story about a circular journey set by the author so that the reader experiences this journey step by step with the narrator himself. The narrator's

monologue reveals his outing with Ali to the local Anvar Mashdi's Teahouse only a few days ago. This recollection conveys the narrator's intention of delving into the past and telling a story that has to do with this dead body in the mortuary.¹⁵⁴

The setting and the beginning scene of *The Tale of a City* can be compared to *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez.¹⁵⁵ Two similar settings written by two different authors from two different regions of the world. What is important here, however, is that the two authors have decided to start their novels by revealing the ending. The amazing aspect of this type of writing is that both authors demonstrate such confidence, that by revealing the end of the story, they are still capable of pulling along the reader and maintaining the intrigue about what has happened to their characters, in Mahmud's case, what has happened to Ali.

In contrast to the straightforward narration of *The Neighbors*, Mahmud abandons the linear journey here and instead he chooses to present his story in a unique style, still in a first-person point of view but much more intricate in style. Even though the author's direct dialogue is intimate in tone, at times it comes across as aloof and tangential, suggesting, perhaps, that the narrator is there only to tell the story and allow the reader to decide for herself. Perhaps, it is this very indirect relationship with his readers that sets this novel apart from *The Neighbors*. Indeed, one of the great advantages of the first-person point-of-view is that it allows the creation of a much more plausible setting where

¹⁵⁴ Mahmud, A. *The Tale of a City*, 11.

¹⁵⁵ The novel tells the story of a multi-generational family, the Buendía, whose patriarch, José Arcadio Buendía, founds the town of Macondo, the metaphoric Colombia. The non-linear story is narrated via different time frames.

the readers are able to connect with the inner thoughts of the narrator, a style of storytelling that allows the author to convey his message more effectively and to transmit this introspection to his readers. On the other hand, a distant third-person point-of-view allows the reader to experience this intimate feeling on her own, independent of the narrator's control or the author's Indicative filtered feelings and emotions. The effect is that the reader can trust the author with ease, and this granted freedom allows her to judge the characters on her own.

To set this novel, Mahmud integrated the technique of stream of conscious, which is perhaps not devoid of literary limitations. Evidently, going back in time and revisiting the past should serve a purpose and provide a solid reason for the author either to gain his readers' trust or to reveal some sort of clue that the reader is searching for to connect the dots. Mahmud is successful in creating a story filled with various interesting and unique characters, especially characters of less importance, to reveal their own stories in their own way. Nevertheless, it is the creation of the main characters such as Khaled, Ali, and even the female character, Sharifeh, that appear to be problematic as they come across, at times, underdeveloped, shady, and questionable. One may assume that the author was hasty to develop these important characters fully. The most obvious example is that the reader still does not know what happened to Sharifeh at age fifteen when she ran away from home, nor is it clear what her feelings and actions are regarding Ali. The reader is not provided an opportunity to see if Sharifeh ever talks to Ali or about Ali as the author simply continues to keep the reader in the dark with regard to their relationship.

Many critics believe that the narration of the storyline in this novel is the continuation recounting of the then political upheaval depicted in *The Neighbors*. The remote landscape and geographical location of a sleepy town with its relatively passive inhabitants is a mere reflection of the nation at large in the aftermath of the *coup d'état*, specifically mirrored in the passive action of the main character, Khaled. He is the manifestation of all the desolate and disappointed intellectuals of his time, representing perhaps a generation who has experienced bitterly repeated failure and betrayal. His main concern is how to pass his days by losing himself in nothingness with the help of alcohol and occasional smoke of opium. This is a brutal reality that the author himself refers to and captures masterfully in this novel and many of his later novels. As Mahmud sees it:

My vision for writing this novel was beyond writing about a small, remote city; we [his generation] had an image of the entire country at large right after the coup d'état, a country which was turned into a suffocating and immobile place, completely torn apart. Whether in the political struggle scene or in the economic arena, the country was turned into a bleak graveyard dominated by the army boots and spears from one side and by the government's representation of a bogus economic progress and growth.¹⁵⁶

Perhaps to demonstrate the distressing surrender of the members of his generation to the power and the recognition of their own vulnerability, the author does not provide the reader with any information about the narrator's past nor his desire to reveal his past.

¹⁵⁶ *Ahamd Mahmud, a Noble Novelist*, from an interview with Bahman Maghsoudlou, the director of the documentary on Mahmud's life, (2004).

The narrator, instead, preoccupies himself with telling the stories of other characters such as Ali, Sharifieh, Qadamkheyr, and even secondary characters like Mohammad Nour, who does everything in town from being the head of the post office to fixing watches and sweeping the streets. Once again, experiencing these political disappointments, Mahmud has positioned the narrator as the “taleteller” to reveal the enigmatic lives of other characters but makes very little effort to shed light on his own life as if to present himself as a sideline character. Mahmud lays out a puzzle in front of his reader, provides certain clues here and there, but invites the reader to put the puzzle together on her own. In an indirect way, he refers the reader to his prior work and past stories. Given that he has set up this relationship with his readers already, he knows well that they will follow him from story to story, from this one novel to the next, thus from *The Neighbors* to *The Tale of a City*. It appears that the author feels that there is no need to provide any explanations, since by now, his readers should know his characters. Mahmud’s writing, therefore, suggests that he may have chosen to write for a certain readership with whom he communicates in a loyal and confidential manner, for he believes that his readers trust him and believe his stories. A clear example would be the unmentioned name of the main character; there are many opportunities throughout the novel for Mahmud to name the main character, but he intentionally refuses to do so, as if “what is the point, my reader already knows who the narrator is,” he is Khaled, of course. It is for this reason that in such a lengthy novel, Khaled’s name is mentioned only once, in a flashback when the narrator recalls his time of military service as he distributes antigovernment leaflets.

Mahmud mentions the name in passing, only to acknowledge the reader's guess and to confirm "you have guessed right. He is Khaled." Mahmud's readers, on the other hand, are well aware of his intention, and therefore, they follow this main character from story to story to witness his transformation through many stages of life, to feel his pain and to experience his loneliness, his disappointments, and his sorrows. For example, when in the house of Khorshidkollah, a secondary female character captured in *The Tale of a City*, the nameless protagonist is offered to smoke opium, the reader is given the opportunity to hear his monologue, "I have seen how it [opium] is being smoked. I have seen it for years, how Khaj Tofiq would fuss with it with such care and smoke it."¹⁵⁷ The author does not even make an effort to tell his reader who Khaj Tofiq, this newly introduced character, is, for he knows his readers have seen this marginal character from his previous stories. In contrast, Mahmud does not shy away from deliberately introducing another marginal character with the same characteristics, another opium addict, Khaj Tofiq, whose name is given as "The man of Khorshidkollah" who exploits his woman, Khorshidkollah, although not as terribly as Khaj Tofiq, who misuses his wife, Afaq.

In this novel, Khaled, however, is no longer a young boy, but a young man, who sits at the brazier and smokes his sorrow away with the help of opium. He does so to forget himself or rather to "remember." As Mahmud once said, "I write to get to know myself, not only to introduce myself to my reader, but to myself."¹⁵⁸ It is a process of

¹⁵⁷ Ahmad Mahmud, *The Tale of a City*, 124.

¹⁵⁸ *Ahamd Mahmud, a Noble Novelist*, from an interview with Bahman Maghsoudlou, the director of the documentary on Mahmud's life (2004).

self-discovery, as he says, “I wrote these things to get to know ourselves. We had to understand what happened, how it all started and why we were defeated.”¹⁵⁹ It is to understand this “self” that Mahmud depicts the physical and mental development and transformation of his ever-present character, Khaled, from his very first novel, *The Neighbors*. And later, he depicts Khaled’s growing tormented soul and detachment in *The Tale of a City*, and soon to follow him in *The Zero Degree Latitude*, to behold him again back in Prison with Baran, another memorable character.

Mahmud believes that it is the writer’s responsibility to write about human conditions, yet he invites the readers to help shape the characters and judge them as they see them. He describes secondary characters in this manner too, for instance, Sharifeh, and lets her evolve on her own and reveal herself. Additionally, with Ali, Sergeant Moradi, Mokhannas, Gilan, Mohmmad Nour, and many other characters, he gives them the chance to define themselves, to provide their own reasons why they act in certain ways and make certain choices. What is important is that they all get a chance to tell their stories in their own way. Like Emile Zola, Mahmud also allows his characters to define themselves under the harsh conditions.

Mahmud goes even one step further in describing the secluded and less familiar town of Bandar Lengeh, echoed in the sarcastic narrator’s monologue, “The size of the entire town is only one span. From the cemetery to Anvar Mashdi’s Teahouse, which is located at the end of the town, and from the shoreline to the Ahan Teahouse, which is

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

across the Poshte hillside, takes only a ten-minute bike ride.”¹⁶⁰ The places captured in *The Tale of a City* are very much limited to the local gatherings where the characters, whether main or secondary, come to life, evolve, and tell their stories. Ultimately, the town itself unfurls before the eyes of the readers as the bits and pieces of its not so distant history are unraveled, a port city that was once prosperous and now has become a forsaken place for the exiled officers such as Khaled. In creating characters like Mamadoo and Seargent Qanem, Mahmud exposes the underlying corruption and sleaziness of law enforcement. Creating types and scenes, which portray the corrupt relationships, confirms Mahmud’s statement that creating this city was beyond creating any “city” but rather to depict the corrupt conditions of the country at large.¹⁶¹ In this novel too, Mahmud has no intention of revealing the internal thoughts of the characters, but rather his concern is to capture the external world that shapes the characters and their actions.

Khaled, the protagonist of the story, reveals very little of his inner thoughts on the breakdown of his ideals after the fall of the Tudeh Party. He does not reflect his disappointment or resentment, if any, nor does he share his reasoning, his conflict or his doubt. The reader observes his actions, passing his days idly and his nights drinking and finding solace in solitude. The reader never sees him react to Ali’s reprimands for him not marrying Sharifeh, or as he ridicules Khaled’s political ideals when he is not even capable of doing something for an abandoned woman to rescue her and to provide her

¹⁶⁰ *The Tale of a City*, 148.

¹⁶¹ Jalali, *Baran bar Zamin-e Sukhteh*, 128.

shelter. It is as if the author puts words in Ali's mouth, not only to give him voice to criticize these failed ideals, but also to confirm this failure as he reveals his inner thought, "he [Ali] gives me my own words."¹⁶²

In contrast to the main character's flaccid demeanor, the character of Ali reveals himself through his expression of intense opinion, his compassion, and his loyalty toward his friends, all reflected and emphasized upon in various places. As the plotline suggests, these characteristic behaviors provide clues beforehand to what to expect next. For instance Ali's recalling his childhood and telling the story of a friend, clearly made up, whose sister has run away from home, reveals rather the story of Sharifeh's escape and his own secret vow to someday find her sister and kill her, thus killing Sharifeh. His confused and irrational reactions to Khaled's intimate relationship with Sharifeh and his extreme sensitivity toward her living place suggests his concealed action and simultaneously provides indirect clues about the two possibly being brother and sister. Yet we as the reader would never know if Sharifeh ever realizes that Ali is her brother or when she decides to leave town, were there any clues that indicate she has suspected this possibility or rather leaving town to shun away the idea of falling in love with Khaled. Only when the reader notices the broken jugs and strewn pans and pots as the narrator himself enters Sharifeh's room, with Sharifeh being absent, the reader can assume that Ali must have been there, and this disorder must be his doing. The author has skillfully rendered this scene and has provided clues for the reader to decide for herself what to

¹⁶² *The Tale of a City*, 354.

make out of the story. Providing clues, as if tracing a maze, in the given details of the physical similarities between Ali and Sharifeh, missing a boat and later finding it in Bandar Kang, where Ali's barrack is located and where he spends his nights, the blood stain on the paddle and the wounds on Ali's wrist – all suggest the murder of Sharifeh at the hands of Ali. Mahmud is successful in creating a story filled with apprehension and mystery, which ends in full circle, particularly when the narrator finds the small locket pendant belonging to Sharifeh in Ali's remaining stuff. Although this finding reveals Ali's action, it adds ambiguity and leaves it to the reader's imagination that Anvar Mashdi, the owner of the harbor teahouse, who has the same facial features as the man in the picture carried in the locket pendant, could have been Ali's father.

The Zero Degree Latitude:

The opening scene of *The Zero Degree Latitude* is a unique setting, in which the story begins in full swing with the horrifying scene of the bloody body of Baran being attacked by a shark in the waters of the Karun River. Baran, yet another memorable character, is an extension of Khaled. In setting up the opening scene, Mahmud not only intrigues his readers but also signals them from the very beginning to expect a different type of story, full of eventful episodes. Opening a novel with such descriptive imageries may appear to be a common trend in postmodern fiction, especially with the overpowering influence of the cinema on written works, but to have utilized this kind of craft at the time that Mahmud wrote, and unlike his other novels, we ought to pay close

attention to Mahmud's choice of craft, which I will come back to in the later chapters. One can definitely assume Mahmud's understanding of how to capture his audience's attention and conjure up their curiosity of what to expect.

One significant aspect of this novel is its ambiguous title, which lends itself to the idea that there must be more behind this title and its relationship to the novel's plotline. This is an important question especially that Mahmud's titles of his prior novels represent their themes and related genres. Although this novel ought to be evaluated independently, as determined earlier, all Mahmud's works, in one way or another, represent a specific socio-political period in the modern history of Iran. Therefore, a conclusion can be drawn that this novel will also follow the same familiar structure and arrangement of themes. In particular, the overarching issues and underlying framework deal with the continuation of the transformation of the young character, Khaled, here by the name of Baran. It appears that Mahmud has chosen this title to make a deliberate point, to validate the fact that all protagonists struggle, and simultaneously the Iranian people's struggle for change and democracy for more than thirty years was simply tired out. It is as though the intellectuals have made a circular journey of nothingness and reached the "zero degree latitude," only to return to the beginning where they started. Mahmud has structured his novels around his political beliefs and ideology that allows the reader to also assume that he has chosen, in an indirect way, to express this achievement of "nothingness" and "regress." The title, thus, suggests the losing ground of a collapsed ideology. For many critics, this is a direct disapproval of Mahmud's

ideologically-driven writing by those who believe that the Iranian writer should not present his ideological manifesto as the work of art since it will be doomed to failure. Perhaps it is for this very reason that a critic like Jalali also argues, “Every writer seeks to find reconciliation in his or her writing, but this artistic writing should not act as the justification for the acceptance of his ideology.”¹⁶³

Mahmud is considered one of the modern Iranian writers who write voluminous novels made up of many characters with distinct mindsets and attitudes, especially key characters that reappear in other novels. This is an undertaking too difficult for the less-skilled writer, not only to create many secondary characters but also to follow their final destinies throughout the novel. This assembly of various and at times contrasting characters work perfectly in *The Neighbors* and *The Tale of a City*, but it is less effective in the novels such as *Zero Degree Latitude*, as in some instances, some of the characters fade away without having an impact on the plotline. Gustav Flaubert, the creator of *Madam Bovary*, believes that the technique of creating numerous characters is one of the hardest styles of writing, especially when writing various dialogues between many characters.¹⁶⁴

As customary in his prior novels, many characters have been presented in this novel without the author making an effort to fully introduce them. Nevertheless, Mahmud has proven that he is capable of creating all these key and secondary characters

¹⁶³ Jalali, *Baran bar Zamin-e Sukhteh*, 132.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 135.

and still give them an independent personality and unique voice. Characters like Baran, Nozar Esfandiari, Usta Yarvaly, Bibi Saltanat, Khavar, Belqeis, and less important characters like Mobarak, Katayun, and Asad the Cripple are among these characters. Although most characters of Mahmud's novels are usually from a certain class, mainly working class, and even though they are from a limited geography, such as the southern part of Iran, their stories are still very much universal and one could locate them in any culture and geography. As always, Mahmud's strength is evident in capturing not only their physicality and their environment but also in depicting concerns related to universal human traits.

Like Sharifeh in *The Tale of a City*, Nozar Esfandiari is a character who offers balance to a lengthy and intense novel such as *The Zero Degree Latitude*. His humorous attitude and simplistic perspective, considering himself as the Jack-Of-All-Trades, minimizes the bleakness of such an intense story and offers the reader some relief at crucial points. Considering that people often make mistakes in real life, and even the most conservative person makes foolish decisions, we tend to be forgiving in real life. When reading a novel, although we are aware that this is a work of fiction and subject to the suspense of disbelief and accept this fact from the very beginning, we as readers tend to be less forgiving when the characters make mistakes or say the wrong things at the wrong time. Therefore, we hold the writer accountable and question her/his motivation, for we know behind characters is a creator who has given them voice and life.

In *The Zero Degree Latitude*, the most memorable character, Nozar, has a sudden change of heart, but the author has not made an effort to offer his readers a logical reason behind this intention. Jalali believes that many modern Iranian writers blindly imitate Hedayat, the most celebrated literary Iranian fiction writer, and he calls this condition “*Hedayatzadegi*”¹⁶⁵ which literally means “the ultimate fixation with Hedayat’s style of writing.” Jalali argues that these writers, including Mahmud, have a tendency to move toward loneliness and isolation from the reality in their works, which he calls “*enzevatalabi*” [the urge for isolation].¹⁶⁶

In particular, the tone of this novel becomes too mechanical at times and cannot sin its entertaining nature, failing to communicate its intimate and immediate emotions with the reader. In addition, the background’s story, where the characters evolve in their everyday lives, is so small in scope, and actions are repeated in the same house, in the same location, at repeated mealtimes, all unnecessary details that make the story less appealing and exciting. For instance, Ussa Yarvaly’s barbershop, used as a focal point yet still a limiting location, and where trivial things happen every day and the author tends to repeat them in details, not only weakens the story but also makes the reader wonder why a skillful writer such as Mahmud insists on repeating this style of linear writing. Making use of flashback as his main technique, this time Mahmud gives voice to another secondary character, Bibi Saltanat, to travel between present time and the past in order to reveal the story’s background whenever he feels he needs to do so. Ailing

¹⁶⁵ Jalali, F. *Baran bar Zamin-e Sukhteh*, 318-19.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid 320.

Bibi Saltanat, a woman with selected memory, often talks about her son, Baran, as if he is still alive. In doing so, the narrator is able to delve into the past and perhaps to seek solace in remembering what Bibi Saltanat remembers. The ironic part of the story, however, is that Bibi Saltanat unexpectedly regains her health back exactly at the end of the novel where the latitude reaches zero, where everything goes back to nihility, yet her health, miraculously, is restored, and she finds her awareness and her place of being and even acknowledges the death of her sons. In capturing this scene, Mahmud pencils in a symbolic conclusion, where everything ends, where the only certain thing achieved is “nihility,” a reality that even the absentminded Bibi Saltanat begins to comprehend and sadly accept.

The Scorched Land

When an author as realist and humanistic as Mahmud looks at the devastating Iran-Iraq war, and the invasion of Iraqi forces of the southern province, Khuzestan, and in particular, their attack on his beloved city, Ahvaz, he cannot produce anything but a genuine work.¹⁶⁷ *The Scorched Land*, which was published in 1981, is written in a simple, straightforward narrative with an eye for details to illustrate the brutality and the impact of this devastating war during the first three months when the war began in 1980. In this relatively short novel—compared to other Mahmud’s novels—yet packed with eventful episodes and numerous characters, Mahmud presents his readers a firsthand

¹⁶⁷ (Ojakians, 2007), *The Neighbors*, 36.

account of a demoralizing war and its impact on the ordinary people and the society as a whole. What preoccupies the author here is not the same repeated tale of the frontline and hand-to-hand combat between the Iranian and Iraqi soldiers, but rather the mere impact of the war on his townspeople as the Iraqi bombs and missiles destroy the southern cities and small towns. The narrative is very much journalistic, and the narrator appears to function more like a cameraman who goes from house to house or follows the local Revolutionary Guards from street to street or from mosque to mosque, all the while mentioning various places, number of martyrs, and sabotaging spies and internal enemy such as the fifth column.

The story begins as the residents of city of Ahvaz, in the last days of summer, eagerly await the opening of schools and universities on the first day of fall. The circulating rumors of the Iraqi army forces settling being stationed at the border seem to have little effect on the peace-loving people who go about their daily lives as usual. However, soon the disturbing news coverage from the local radio increases day by day. People begin to build trenches and handmade Molotov cocktails and learn how to use weapons for self-defense at the local mosques and schools. With the advancement of the enemy forces, disorder, disarray, and fear gradually dominate over the townspeople. The residents begin to take refuge in the underground shelters at nights, and some even leave town to save their lives with little to nothing of their belongings. Some are successful in finding a safe place of refuge in the nearby towns or far off cities, but some return,

defeated, disheartened, and rejected by people who think of them as refugees without the courage to stay and protect their home, their city, and their country against the enemy.¹⁶⁸

Like many of the residents, the narrator's extended family, his aging mother, his many brothers and sisters and their families, and some of the relatives, also spend many nights behind blanket-covered windows in the storage room, now turned into a shelter. As the situation worsens, and Saddam's bombing intensifies rapidly, more and more residents are forced to leave town for the capital Tehran and other cities. Only the narrator and two of his brothers remain behind. That too changes as the narrator's brother, Khaled, gets killed by enemy bombings. Khaled's death, however, causes their younger brother, Shahed, severe depression and psychological imbalance. To help him alleviate the pain, he too is sent to live with the rest of the family, leaving the narrator as the last family member remaining in town. Finding himself utterly alone in a house with bitter memories, he decides to seek refuge at a neighbor's house, Nanneh Baran's house, located near the main town square.

Nanneh Baran is a proud middle-aged woman whose only preoccupation is how to learn to use a weapon to avenge the death of her son, Baran, who has been killed at the frontline by Iraqi soldiers. The location of the house and the town square is crucial to the story since it is a circular focal point, replacing the usual existence of the teahouse, where the narrator reports the everyday happenings of the characters. This is a good

¹⁶⁸ As the war become more intensified and the people began to leave the southern cities to find refuge in the neighboring cities or even much farther cities, the local residents may have acted harshly towards the newly arrived war-stricken residents and may have expressed and expected the southerners to stay back and fight against the enemy.

opportunity for the narrator to visit this part of the town frequently, especially Mehdi Papati's teahouse, and to report his observations and to talk with the local people about the war. It is through these dialogs that various types of characters are introduced, each representing one particular social class. For instance, having lost their fathers or other family members, families return home and report on their brief life in a refugee camp in the neighboring cities, the inhumane condition, and the horrible treatment by other countrymen, who treat them like foreigners. The old Amir Soleyman is another character who tends to abandoned cows in town, feeding them so he can milk them and give this milk to the poor and the needy, who are left with nothing. We get to see a young boy of sixteen who is madly in love with the idea of going to the frontline to fight Saddam's army. There is Mirza Ali the Lover, who awaits his beloved as she walks by only to get a glimpse of her face, and other characters, which are the ever-present faces throughout the novel.

What sets this novel apart from Mahmud's other novels is the fact that ordinary people are portrayed as being able to also be cruel and merciless. Unlike the working class presented in *The Neighbors* as "good" and honorable, in this story, there is no trace of people like Amu Bandar and Ussa Haddad, but more people such as Sheikh Nasrollah, the Cleric, and obnoxious characters like Kal Sha'ban. However, as Baran reminds us, "war has its own logic," and war changes according to place, time, and various characters. This very logic makes Mohammad the Mechanic remain in town and protect his home, and this is the very logic that justifies the people's decision of taking Iraqi

prisoners of war and perform street executions while another group has to remind them to abide by international law and allow the authorities avenge their crimes.

Kal Sha'ban, the only storekeeper in town, takes advantage of the horrible condition and hikes the prices of scarce daily essentials. Not too long ago, he among many residents took to the street and shouted, "death to the Shah," but now becoming greedier by day, he believes that he deserves to be appreciated and sell the needed goods at a much higher price, that people should not protest because he decided to stay in town rather than leave like the rest of the shopkeepers. He is now preoccupied with doubling or tripling his profits and becoming wealthy overnight. There are other people too who are trying to fish in the muddy water, buying houses and cars from the terrified and panic-stricken people who are heading for other cities for safe haven. Just like Kal Sha'ban, they also claim that they are at great risk by staying in town, buying these properties, which may end up being bombed anyway. It is based on this logic that Kal Sha'ban's house and business are eventually looted by the former professional charlatans and ordinary people, who have all had enough of Kal Sha'ban's misconduct. It is the same logic that permits ordinary people to put the looters of abandoned houses on public trial and condemn them to death.

In the final chapter, a message from the narrator's brother brings the narrator back to his own house. Witnessing the house in ruins by the Iraqi's bombs, and once again, recalling the scene of Khaled's death, the narrator finds himself filled with sorrow. The phone rings, and someone, perhaps a cousin, gives him the news of his brother, Shahed,

being hospitalized in the psychiatric hospital, urges the narrator to join his family, and in particular his worrisome mother, quickly before he too is killed. Thus, at dawn, the sound of massive explosion drives the narrator to the Town Square, where he witnesses the dead bodies of many people who were his companions only yesterday. He observes the bombed and ruined houses, Nanneh Baran's house among them. Everything has turned into dust. He grasps that war too has its own destructive and devastating logic. He observes Mohammad the Mechanic's severed arm, splinted between the dried-up branches of the date palm tree, his finger formed in the shape of a gun, pointing to the heart of the narrator as if its bullet ready to be released.¹⁶⁹

In general, Mahmud succeeds in creating a broad picture of the war-stricken cities at the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war, and in capturing the ordinary people's fears, their devastation, resistance, and hopes. Additionally, he succeeds in portraying various classes of society and the roles they play, in particular those of looters who profit from the devastation of other citizens. His style of writing, straightforward and uncomplicated, is devoid of any literary style as the narrator simply reports the events. As in *The Tale of a City*, the passive narrator acts merely as a man behind the camera, zooming his camera on places, people, and incidents as the story necessitates. This distancing style of writing could be compared to a scene from a documentary where the audience is presented a piece of news with no particular input required, where the audience is unable to smell the air, feel the breeze, or even experience this sorrowful sentiment in a heartfelt way. If this

¹⁶⁹ Ahmad Mahmud, *Zamin-e Sukhteh*, 329.

is the author's aim to mirror a devastating war and its impact, we can say that Mahmud was successful. Otherwise, the intimate connection between the writer and the reader is completely lost in this novel, especially that Mahmud's readers are used to his compassionate and heartfelt style of writing.

Another shortcoming of this work is the utter abandonment of the old ideals, which are now replaced, more or less, by the dominant religious rituals and the sound of daily prayers coming from the mosque or recited by various townspeople or the narrator's family. The religious aspect, its unquestionable acceptance by the former leftist, and its dominant influence on everyone, young and old, have been depicted throughout the novel and is interrupted only occasionally by the author's socially critical tongue, which emerges suddenly yet fades away as quickly.¹⁷⁰

Another drawback of this novel is the lack of a solid portrayal of the narrator himself for the reader is not provided enough details who the narrator is, what is his occupation and his name. In addition, the reader has a difficult time to fully understand what is the narrator's internal thoughts and feelings on this catastrophic war, his intention of staying in Ahvaz, where everyone is running away, and his reasoning for simply going from one house to the next to spend his nights. This ongoing passiveness may suggest Mahmud's intention of writing solely for his "readership," those who follow his stories from one novel to the next and are familiar with his style of storytelling, his characters and their approach in various situations. If so, this will confirm Mahmud's lack of desire

¹⁷⁰ Jalali, *Baran Bar Zamin-e Sukhteh*, 186.

to expand on certain scenes or to offer more clarity to guide his readers with what is happening at present and why the characters speak and behave in certain ways. While this is a pattern in many of Mahmud's novels, the most perplexing issue is that the narrator provides a detailed account of the lives of other characters but not his own. By and large, the narrator often wanders around as if he has nothing else to do and does not even make any effort to speak to people. Considering the first-person narration, it becomes more problematic, as the reader can only rely on the narrator as the story unfolds through his perspective, a common phenomena in the work of fiction. That may explain why the narrator continues to move from one house to another to report on the horrible conditions. The first-person narrator must be able to fulfill the role of the omniscient point of view to be present in every house and every corner so that the reader can follow the courses of action.

Every piece of literature is expected to maintain its autonomy and its ability to explain the foundation of the work, thus, referring the readers to prior novels for instance, may present itself as a shortcoming of Mahmud's novels. Many readers may find it unreasonable that the author expects them to know the characters and their mindset from prior novels. Despite this shortcoming, the characters in *The Scorched Land*, like in Mahmud's other novels, are still unforgettable, characters like Baran, Nanneh Baran, and the ever-present Mohammad the Mechanic. Considering that Mahmud wrote this novel in less than three months, it is still a genuine documentation of a bloody and unnecessary battle between two neighboring countries. The story, thus, sheds light on the lives of

ordinary people in the land of heat and fire; it portrays a devastating war that causes the death of hundreds of innocent people daily, as it destroys their houses, as they struggle to remain in their homes despite the horrible living conditions they have to endure. It is a story where the enemy is physically absent and where the struggle takes place in each individual citizen's house, not on the frontline with the soldiers.

Men in Mahmud's Stories:

Generally speaking, men in Mahmud's stories are depicted as hardworking yet struggling working class men who begin and end at nowhere, mostly with nothing. There are ever-present characters like Mahmud's all time hero, Khaled, the main character and the narrator in *The Neighbors*, his father, Ussa Haddad, Mash Rahim, Baran, Nozar Esfandiari, Goshtasb, Amu Bandar, Naser Davani, Mohammad the Mechanic, and many prisoners condemned to a life behind bars. In contrast, there are also characters shown as lazy, parasitic, and freeloading characters, such as Hajj Tofiq and the Man of Khorshidkollah, who simply squander away their wives' hard-earned money on smoking opium. Khorshidkollah's Man, for example, uses Khorshidkollah for the pleasure of his customers by sleeping with them and entertaining them. There is also another group of male characters who are portrayed as evil, characters such as Ali Sheitan the Mole, who earns a living by spying on political activists; Gholam Ali Khan, who abuses his authority to strike fear in his subordinates; and the brutal interrogators and abusive armed forces. The latter type of characters, who may succeed monetarily, as the narrator sees it, will

never gain the people's respect since it has chosen not to support the helpless and common people.

The main character and the only male hero in *The Neighbors*, Khaled, is a fifteen-year old boy who by circumstance is transformed from a carefree, inexperienced boy into a curious, alert, and self-sacrificial young man who stands up for his newly-acquired ideals. This particular view that Mahmud has captured in this novel not only represents the mindset of a generation consumed by its ideology and politics, but also reflects Mahmud's inescapable literary approach which is present throughout his works. It is a representation of an ideology that believes there are those who "know" and those who "don't know." In other words, once again, these are the masses who, despite being good and decent, need to be liberated, for if left on their own, they would be lost and manipulated by the status quo.

Ussa Haddad, Khaled's father, for instance, is shown as a good, hardworking man who rarely gives up hope even when he finds himself in dire situations. In his simplistic perspective, he continues to believe that "This world for the true believer is nothing but a prison."¹⁷¹ The narrator never criticizes Ussa Haddad's outlook and his naïveté, but instead honors him by referring to him as "father" throughout the novel, with the exception of one place, when he affectionately calls him "Baba."¹⁷² In doing so, the narrator distinguishes him from the likes of Mash Rahim's sons, the obedient and frail Hasani, and Ebram the Petty Thief. Even when Ussa Haddad comes to visit his son,

¹⁷¹ *The Neighbors*, 28

¹⁷² *Ibid*, 15

Khaled, who is behind prison bars, he remains the kind “father figure” who looks at his son admiringly, approving his cause and choice of action. Khaled’s father, Ussa Haddad, is an honest and principled man who is down-to-earth and believes in the value of hard work and the power of prayers. Once, face to face with him, he embraces his son, his gaze approving his son’s stance against the corrupt power and his defense of the poor, people like himself. Compared to the father in “The Return,” Ussa Haddad is a more understanding father. Not only does Goshtasb’s father not approve of Goshtasb’s political activities, but he also constantly belittles him, though not directly, for his ideals, his lack of initiative and responsibility, and for not being able to contribute to his family by finding a decent job. Failing to understand his son, similar to the generation before him, he does not find any value in pursuing an education and insists that Goshtasb also do whatever menial jobs he is offered, as he is no longer able to find an office job due to having been convicted as a former political activist. He urges Goshtasb to do as his brother, Shahriyar, has done, abandoning his dream of becoming a doctor despite the fact that he has been admitted to the University of Tehran, yet he cannot pursue his education because of lack of sufficient funds.

On the other hand, Khaled’s father, despite no clear understanding of his son’s predicament, unlike the rest of the fathers in Khaled’s neighborhood, is not there to reprimand his son by uttering the famous phrase: “Son, I told you so.” Ussa Haddad looks up to his grown son and sees, perhaps, the man he wished to become himself. Compared with the judgmental and stern fathers portrayed in the works of writers of

Mahmud's generation and even the generation before him, particularly in works written by Hedayat, Mahmud seems to have broken with this traditional approach. He has deliberately chosen to put aside this constant battle between father and son captured in the works of many modern Iranian writers.

Looking back at Mahmud's early works, many of the characters that become the key characters in Mahmud's later novels were introduced as far back as in the story of "Our Little Town,"¹⁷³ in which many fundamental problems and conflicts rise up as the palm trees are uprooted by the government official and the overall image of this small town changes overnight. We witness how townspeople, the young narrator, and his father were forced to leave their town due to the newly discovered oil reserves, and consequently, the arrival of the new oil companies to replace the palm groves with an oil refinery. Against the backdrop of a turbulent time are the growing political factions, standing for various political ideals. Their aim is to unite the nation to fight the oppressors and achieve economic and political independence. As the active member of his left-wing faction, Shafaq, the tanker drivers, the oil refinery workers, and the factory workers are among the characters who represent this movement. Even Amu Bandar and Mohammad the Mechanic, who insist on unifying the poor, belong to this category of characters.

¹⁷³ *Dastan-e Shahr-e Kuchek-e Ma* could be interpreted as the foundation of Mahmud's first novel, *The Neighbors*.

Amu Firouz, Baran's uncle, who is also a character borrowed from the short story "Barkhord" [Encounter]¹⁷⁴ is a farmer who has lost his land to the flood and his farming life is replaced by the force of machines and industry. This is rather a theme that Mahmud has depicted in stories such as "Bandar" [The Harbor] and "Aseman-e Abi-ye Dez" [The Blue Sky of Dez].¹⁷⁵ The impact of the newly imported cars, the swamp of immigrant farmers to the city and their struggle to assimilate, and their lost agricultural and traditional pastoral life are themes rendered in these stories. Just as Amu Bandar of *The Neighbors* came to the city in search of work, Amu Firouz and two of his sons have come to the authorities in order to complain about their lost land. Nozar, another key character, who crosses paths with Amu Firouz, decides to help him and uses his brother's influence, General Rostamali, to help him but unfortunately does not succeed. At the end, not only is Amu Firuz forced to abandon his complaints about his lost land, but he is also compelled to remain in the city doing all kind of menial jobs. He increasingly encounters problems and disappointments, and his two sons experience an even worse destiny, as they are subjected to their set of horrible conditions.

Women in Mahmud's Stories:

In contrast to the male characters, the women play a secondary role in Mahmud's works. Although the women are very much visible everywhere in Mahmud's stories, to

¹⁷⁴The short story "Encounter" is from the collection of short stories *A Pilgrim Under the Rain*, which was published in 1967.

¹⁷⁵ Various years of publication are given for these two short stories, but most likely, they were published in 1962.

the point that even the novel *The Neighbors* begins with the screams of a woman, Bolur Khanom, women do not play a pivotal role in Mahmud's stories. He introduces mainly two types of women: the married yet battered women who have some sort of an affair with the main characters, such as Bolur Khanom, and the meek, docile, caring mother figures who accept their faith and their inferiority to their men. In the footsteps of Hedayat and in the continuation of the deep-rooted desire for the ethereal, unattainable beautiful woman of the novel, *The Blind Owl*,¹⁷⁶ in Mahmud's novels, the reader also witnesses the introduction of this type of beautiful, pure, unattainable Black-Eyed woman,¹⁷⁷ who appears now and then in the story for brief moments only to disappear mysteriously, leaving the narrator with an urge to find her.

Just like the hardworking men in Mahmud's stories, there is also the introduction of many hardworking women, for whom the author shows great sympathy for, including Sanam, who cares for her young sickly son; and Afaq, who takes care of her opium-addict husband as well as Nanneh Hasani, Nanneh Baran, Khorshidkolah, Belqeis, and many others. These women manage a life on their own, doing whatever it takes to make ends meet. Most women in Mahmud's novels are man-less or if married, none of their men are depicted as men of honor but rather men who exploit their wives, beat their wives, abandon them, abuse them, and misuse them as a source of income, as Khaj Tofiq

¹⁷⁶ The Blind Owl (Buf-e Kur in Persian) is considered a major literary work of 20th century Iran. The story depicts an unnamed pen case painter, the narrator, who sees in his macabre, feverish nightmares that the presence of death annihilates all that is imaginary.

¹⁷⁷ The Black-Eyed is referred to the beautiful girl, who young Khaled, the narrator of *The Neighbors*, falls in love with, but she is, nevertheless, unattainable. This comparison has been made with the unattainable female character, The Ethereal Girl, who is depicted in the Blind Owl.

uses Afaq or Khorshidkollah's Man takes advantage of Khorshidkollah. In Mahmud's stories, the sons carry the weight of importance not the fathers. Women like Nanneh Baran, Sanam, Afaq, Fatemeh Soltan, and many others who are the breadwinners and the decision makers, have a voice and their voices echo throughout the novels.

In some instances, the narrator reveals his endearing relationship with his mother. Khaled expresses his deep admiration for his mother, who in the absence of his father, secures income by washing clothes for the wealthy families. Unlike Gholam, Aunt Ra'na's son, who is not bothered by his mother's choice of profession and rather swindles her hard-earned money, Khaled resents his mother for becoming a "washing woman" and offers to work even more often in Aman Aqa's teahouse to help his mother.¹⁷⁸ In the same manner that he insists of addressing his father as "father" rather than the common way of addressing him as "*baba*," he honors this group of hardworking women, and addresses his own mother as "Mother" not as "Nanneh" throughout the novel, an act of separating himself from the rest of the boys in his neighborhood.

Moreover, the narrators in the later novels too have an endearing relationship with the "mother." For instance in *The Scorched Land* the narrator reveals the special relationship the mother has with her son, whose name also happens to be "Khaled," and when Khaled dies in an explosion, the narrator's tremendous sorrow and grief for the death of his brother loom over the entire novel. No longer able to remain in a house where his brother, Khaled, lost his life, the narrator leaves the house and seeks refuge

¹⁷⁸ Mahmud, A. *The Neighbors*, 67-69

instead in Nanneh Baran's house, another strong female character and a mother in Mahmud's novels.¹⁷⁹

As a general rule, the women in Mahmud's stories are mostly imperfect and have shortcomings, but their voices become more audible and their roles take an important shape in several stories. In *The Neighbors*, for instance, the women either seek a sexual or a romantic relationship with other men or rebel against the authorities. The women who are depicted as "good" are usually either old or submissive women, such as Khaled's own mother in *The Neighbors*, or sick and dying such as Nanneh Hasani, the first wife of Rahim the Donkey-Keeper, who dies at an unknown disease. The only relatively indistinct woman who is both young and beautiful is the wife of Mohammad the Mechanic, who is an extremely introverted woman and keeps to herself, as if "she's not in the house at all."¹⁸⁰ There is Sanam, who is a hardworking and resourceful woman, at times unyielding and rebellious to the point that she bucks against tradition. For example, as the only woman, she decides to go to the cemetery in the company of men, or she decides to build an oven in the courtyard so she can bake bread and sell to earn an income, an action that comes to an end by the order of the city ordinate and the local rival baker.¹⁸¹

In *The Tale of a City*, Mahmud also pays close attention to women such as Sharifeh, a young, misfortunate but bold prostitute. Creating Sharifeh gives balance to

¹⁷⁹ This female character is the extension of Khaled's mother depicted in *The Neighbors*. She is, however, is a fighter by nature and is depicted rather as a "manlike" and "masculine" character throughout the novel *The Scorched Land*.

¹⁸⁰ Mahmud, A. *The Neighbors* , 55.

¹⁸¹ Ibid. 158-160.

the long story dominated by male characters. Her miserable destiny and her relationship with other characters eliminates the fear of the novel becoming monotone and heavy, especially in such suffocating places where there is nothing but boredom. Her character is not the cliché character of the miserable, dejected prostitute used in modern literature, in particular the French novels, but rather someone who sounds, acts, and appears real and plausible as she is sensible and resourceful.

In creating such straightforward scenes, Mahmud not only highlights the mistreatment of women by men, but also reveals the history of a town that was once prosperous. The reader can look back through the past and see how this political and cultural phenomenon called “unveiling,” a part of Reza Shah’s reform to liberate women, forced many religious men who could not bear the idea of their wives and daughters being stripped away from their Islamic head-covering overnight to leave their homes and country to seek refuge in neighboring Arab countries.¹⁸² Thus, Mahmud briefly points out the reasons why Bandar Lange is in its atrocious isolated condition is in today’s modern days.¹⁸³

Despite the significance of her name, which means “the noble woman,” Mahmud’s view of Sharifeh is particularly interesting for young, beautiful women such

¹⁸² *Kashf-e Hejab* as it is called in Persian is translated as “Unveiling” or “Women’s Awakening.” As part of the modernization of the nation, Reza Shah, the father of Mohammad Reza Shah, introduced, and for the most part enforced, the Women's Awakening (1936–1941). This movement’s aim was to eliminate the Islamic head covering from Iranian working society. Supporters held that the veil impeded the ability of women to enter society and contribute to the progress of the nation. This move met opposition from the religious establishment and as a result, many religious men along with their families left Iran to settle in the neighboring Arab countries. This reference has been made in *The Tale of a City*.

¹⁸³ Mahmud, A. *The Tale of a City*, 25-26.

as Sharifeh stand hardly any chance by the narrator, as empathetic as he is. Khaled, who even admits that he loves her, cannot bring himself to marry Sharifeh and to pull her out of this imposed misery. After all, in his mind, she is not chaste, since other men have soiled her purity. The same concept applies to Gongu, a mute young woman who has been raised as a child in a brothel and has been forcefully addicted to opium to submit to prostitution and make money for her pimp, in return for the roof above her head. Being older and battered, she too has found a shelter for herself among the remote cardboard shacks on the outskirts of the city. Gongu is another extension of Sharifeh, but less advantageous. However, as a writer belonging to the school of social realism, Mahmud's attempt is not to make a hero out of his characters, especially the leading characters, but rather to depict characters' choice of action as real people would do at a time of conflict in real life. Khaled, the narrator, is not to become the rescuer of the lonely prostitutes, but he makes a choice as believable as many young men in his place would make in real life. As much as Sharifeh's presence and love brings comfort to Khaled's life, this relationship ends abruptly as Sharifeh is drowned in the sea, and the reader is left with the narrator's heartfelt sympathy and pity, but nothing else.

The three women in *The Tale of a City* are Sharifeh, Khorshidkollah, and Qadamkheyr. The author has attempted to depict an imposed misfortune on each one of them as these marginalized women deal with a doomed destiny that cannot be escaped. The author expresses his criticism of a society that does not offer any protection to these

kinds of defenseless women. The men use them without mercy to satisfy their sexual needs and abandon them without a sense of responsibility.

Sharifeh is a young and beautiful woman perhaps in her late twenties, whose arrival in this forsaken port city attracts men's attention and desires, but these men do not love her, intent to marry her, or ever offer her any social protection; they only use her body. She finds herself falling in love with the young narrator, Khaled, but knowing well that Khaled also would not marry her, as dignified and independent a woman as she is, she decides to leave town to save herself from this one-sided love. Ironically, she is mysteriously found drowned, and there is no sympathy from men who only nights before had gone to her in search of lust and warmth in her arms. She is simply remembered as "that prostitute."¹⁸⁴ It is through depicting scenes such as Sharifeh's sudden death that the narrator calls for the reader's sympathy and for the social injustice against abused women.

As the dead body of Sharifeh washes onto the shore, and as the authorities begin a bogus interrogation of local men, the reader is able to envision the indifferent mindset of a society of men towards this type of women. These harbor men, who sought Sharifeh's company in private, are not inclined to give any attention to this murder and openly express that this is not a subject worth talking about. Not only do they lack compassion, but they also believe that Sharifeh was just another prostitute who deserved an unfortunate death at the end, a death does not call for a proper burial. The only person

¹⁸⁴ Mahmud, A. *The Tale of a City*, 284-287.

who shows sympathy is Qadamkheyr, who criticizes the men's cruel indifference. Her usual ordinary dialect is replaced with a sophisticated narrator/author voice that has found a golden opportunity to become, once again, the social critic and to criticize this ill-mannered mentality of a society which causes defenseless, uneducated, and deprived women to surrender to this traditionally degrading making a living. The narrator/author purposely intends to call his readers' attention to this issue and to blame this choice of profession imposed upon impoverished women on the inaction of men in society in assisting this population group. As the many dialogs between the characters suggest, Ali the Soldier, for instance, poses these questions to the narrator, "Who's to blame? Why don't you help her? Why don't you marry her?"¹⁸⁵ The reader, of course, can see that even the narrator recognizes that this sort of union is impossible and unacceptable to society.

Khorshidkolah is also a young barren woman, though not as beautiful and feisty as Sharifeh, but rather quiet and submissive. As her last resort, she too has chosen to live with an older opium addict, supposedly her husband, only in name so that she could live in relative peace without other men causing her trouble. Helping her husband, who the narrator calls "*mardash*," or "her man," she keeps up the small bungalow located in the heart of an isolated orchid on the edge of the Harbor. She serves and tends to the customers who come to the house to smoke opium and, occasionally, sleep with her if they are willing to pay. Like Sharifeh, Khorshidkolah falls in love with Khaled, thinking

¹⁸⁵ Mahmud, A. *The Tale of a City*, 126-127.

that he is unlike other men who come to the house and fantasizes about perhaps finding happiness with him, a wish which will, of course, never materialize in the story; she ends up giving up her hope.¹⁸⁶

The third woman, Qadamkheyr, is a local woman who has fallen in love with a brawny sergeant. Unfortunately, despite all her hard-earned money that she has spent on him, the sergeant ends up leaving her for a sexual relationship with a young boy, who Qadamkheyr calls “Effeminate.”¹⁸⁷ In return, the sergeant now spends his money on this young boy, buying his love and protecting him from any locals who dare to reproach this young boy. The misfortunate Qadamkheyr leads a life in limbo, suffering a constant battle between love and hate for her lover, who she hopes will someday come back to her.

Overall, women are not the leading characters in Mahmud’s story, not even those characters who tend to become revolutionary, characters such as Nanneh Baran or Leila, Mullah Ahmad’s daughter, who becomes Khaled’s only connection to the outside world while in prison. The issue that may be worth mentioning is that although Mahmud has taken a great leap in breaking with the traditional approach, it seems that he has not fully embraced the idea of modern women in his writings. Leila, for instance, is an important and unique character, who could represent the women’s struggle for democracy and reform shoulder to shoulder with the men in Mahmud’s works. While she is present in three of Mahmud’s novels, he has settled by only introducing her as a marginal

¹⁸⁶ Mahmud, A. *The Tale of a City* 176-177.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. 23.

character with “a daring gaze and bold attitude,”¹⁸⁸ but not really honoring her revolutionary actions. She is mentioned for an instant in the novel *The Tale of a City*, as the narrator crosses paths with Leila’s younger fashionable sister in one of the trendy new cafes, but the narrator is reluctant to approach her and ask about Leila and her whereabouts. Instead, the reader is informed briefly that Leila has suffered enormous emotional and psychological torture by SAVAK, including a lost eye, a distorted face, and a life in isolation. The reader only hears the narrator’s monologue as he feels pity for Leila and considers finding her and marrying her. There is a sense of pity, but not admiration. It is the likes of the Black-Eyed girl that the narrator desires and pursues, while expressing only sympathy for the young prostitutes such as Gongu and Sharifeh.

Another very important and memorable character is Bolur Khanom, a character, whose name alone, Bolur,¹⁸⁹ signifies fragility, transparency, and tenderness in nature- a name that reflects the author’s intentional choice to reveal the characteristic behavior of this woman.¹⁹⁰ In contrast to what Mahmud has strived to accomplish in portraying a battered woman, who looks elsewhere to alleviate the violent treatment by her husband, and his attempt at exposing abusive husbands who beat their wives to release the stress of their daily lives, none of the critics have noted this aspect of Mahmud’s writing. Khaled’s mind as inexperienced as he seems, draws the reader’s attention to both abusive men and battered women when he expresses his conflicting desire for Bolur Khanom and

¹⁸⁸ Mahmud, A. *The Neighbors*, 283.

¹⁸⁹ Meaning Crystal

¹⁹⁰ Jalali, F. *Baran bar Zamin-e Sukhteh*, 64.

at the same time guilt for having a taboo relationship with Aman Aqa's wife. "I toss my jacket on the floor and lay down on the mattress, and swear to myself that I would not touch Bolur Khanom ever again."¹⁹¹

Even Jalali, the only critic who favors the necessity of the creation of Bolur Khanom's character, does not exhibit a fair picture of this controversial female character. In his critiques, he still refers to her as "the skilled slut."¹⁹² After all, she is still the same lascivious, lecherous woman who seduces Khaled, a young boy, in order to fulfill her own sexual desires. What Jalali and similar critics fail to point out is the pain and suffering of a young woman, battered by her drunkard, abusive husband, and perhaps experiencing being loved by a man for the first time, who, too, ends up break her heart and injure her pride by rejecting her, as Khaled rejects Bolur Khanom.¹⁹³

Nevertheless, this narrator's course of action suggests that Khaled has found a new awareness, a change of heart, a realization apart from the fear of God's punishment and afterlife, nothing to do with his father's all-knowing jinn, and not even the fear of scandal if caught by the neighbors. Rather it is his sense of morality and respect for good, respect for Aman Aqa, who is good to him, and recognition that he should not have an intimate relationship with a married woman, not to mention his new love for Black-Eyed, which intensifies this rejection.

¹⁹¹ Mahmud, A. *The Neighbors*, 168.

¹⁹² Ibid, 61.

¹⁹³ Ibid, 235-238.

Even though Mahmud has acquired a keen awareness about working class women, he fails to demonstrate true sympathy toward women who stand up for their rights, a concept almost nonexistent in most Mahmud's work. Regarding the proletariat and their social rights, Mahmud's stance is precise, and he is as vociferous as any writer, whose works indicate social realism. However, regarding radical women, Mahmud only toils with the idea, shows sympathy and respect in passing, but offers a vague picture of this concept, not knowing what to do with them or how to approach their proposed social rights.

He even tries to depict many male characters, who are, in general, good to women, even though they tend to use them. In many cases, the narrator expresses great respect for characters such as Afaq, Sanam, Nanneh Baran, Khaled's own mother, and other secondary female characters. Despite this sentiment, Mahmud falls short to create and give voice to strong young female characters who stand up for their rights. He has simply scratched the surface by creating unrefined, barely developed characters like Leila, the brave young girl who joins the political movement of the time, who visits Khaled in prison, and who is arrested, tortured, and condemned to a life of utter isolation revealed in the story "The Return."

The role of women in the novel *The Scorched Land* is also of great importance. For instance, Nanneh Baran, who has recently lost her son, Baran, on the front line and

whose character reminds the reader of the mother in Maxim Gorky's *Mother*,¹⁹⁴ is not an ordinary, passive, and submissive woman. In the fifth and final chapter, when several citizens decide to prosecute two looters, Ahmad Ferri and Yusef, who have been stealing and selling people's belongings, it is Nanneh Baran who decides that the two men should be punished, and it is she herself who carries out the act of execution and shoots Yusef.¹⁹⁵ Of course, by the time the armed Committee members arrive at the scene, it is too late, as the people have taken the law into their own hands. Although arrested, Nanneh Baran is released due to the support of the local people who gather in front of the local mosque, demanding her release. In a way, Nanneh Baran is "manlike" and even her manners and physicality, her harsh facial features and soft mustache. Her manners resemble more those of a man than a woman, all factors which lend themselves to Mahmud's inconsistency in rendering the radical female characters.

In general, Mahmud has a clear idea on regarding the descriptions and actions of the mothers and elderly women, which are often depicted as patient, hardworking, kind, and uncomplaining characters, but when it comes to young girls and sisters in his stories, he tends to keep them on the periphery, mostly passive with little contribution to the story's development. For example, Khaled's younger sister, Jamileh, who is depicted merely as a shadowy figure, is for the most part passive. The reader seldom hears her talk and is primarily seen at dinnertime or bedtime. The reader will revisit her as the

¹⁹⁴ Nanneh Baran resembles very much like the mother depicted in *The Mother* by Maxim Gorky in 1906. The story is about the revolutionary factory workers. Interestingly, the male character's name is Pavel, a name that is being mentioned in *The Neighbors* as Khaled admires the character, Povel, from the Russian novel he reads.

¹⁹⁵ Mahmud, A. *The Scorched Land*, 280-281.

narrator's sister in the story of "The Return," who in the absence of Goshtasb, the main character, has grown into a beautiful young woman finishing up her high school education. Once again, here too, the reader only sees her returning home from school or preparing a water pipe for her old and senile grandmother.

The same is also true in the case of Leila, the daughter of Mullah Ahmad, who first appeared in *The Neighbors* and then resurfaced in the story of "The Return." It is through his stray thoughts and self-blame that the reader is able to see the insignificant consideration that he ought to go find her and marry her now that she is half-blind. Even though she is very heroic, Mahmud fails to highlight this aspect of the woman warrior. In a sense, he still has one foot in the traditional literary world, where in the works of former authors such as Hedayat and Chubak, the place of modern women is still an ambiguous one and not equal to that of the male heroes, but rather on the sideline. It is still the ethereal woman, the seductive Black-Eyed women, who are sought after. The young beautiful desolate women are there for the heroes to find solace in their arms and not to be married or rescued. This aspect may confirm an important aspect of social realism works, which insist on portraying characters with real and believable characteristic behaviors.

In other words, the creation of these young modern women is simply there to fill some gaps, for instance, the young girls who are being introduced as the potential future wife for Goshtasb in *The Scorched Land*. Ironically, as much as many characters continue to reappear in many of Mahmud's novels, Black-Eyed would never reemerge in

the sequel or even the later novels, as if Mahmud has deliberately distended himself from this traditionally rendered notion of “unattainable woman put on pedestal.” However, the young prostitutes are the types of characters who reappear in most Mahmud’s novels.

By creating simple, unassuming female characters, Mahmud has created characters such as Mohammad the Mechanic’s wife and Belqeis in order to complete especially the leading character. Belqeis, for instance, is Nozar Esfandiari’s wife, whose simple and uncomplicated character balances the passionate and impulsive character of Nozar. Her simplicity, her repeated phrase “*voy, besmellah*,”¹⁹⁶ and her constant astonishment about the happenings around her, have created a humorous and entertaining situation which alleviates the heaviness of such a lengthy novel of 1782 pages, offering the reader quick comic relief.

There is also the existence of young vibrant girls like Maedeh, the daughter of Kal Bashir, who Baran wishes to marry against his mother’s wishes, and other female revolutionary characters such as Manijeh and Maedeh, the daughters of Kal Sha’ban and Hakimeh, who work in the small clothing manufacturing company of Mohandes Delavar, a company which is managed by Sarvan. Namdar, a dissident in the 50s who has gone to prison for his political activities against the former regime, now lives with Khavar and meets Manijeh and marries her. Quickly, he tries to influence other people around him by imposing his political views, as once again, he has joined an underground political activist group, whose members are soon arrested and the entire group vanishes. Manijeh

¹⁹⁶ Literally means “in the name of God” a phrase that the character utters when she is surprised or has a difficult time believing something.

gets killed, Namdar disappears, and their only child, Pirouz, is left under the care of Baran and Maedeh.

In essence, the character of Baran is an extension of young Khaled in *The Neighbors*, but is now older. This triangle relationship of Baran, Maedeh, and Manijeh, and the existence of a boy, Pirouz, the offspring of the dead Manijeh and Baran, is an ongoing hope for Mahmud to reach his political fantasy, the symbolic attainment of a failed goal, which if not realized in real life can at least occur in the world of fiction. This boy, Pirouz, is a ray of hope that someday victory will be achieved despite all the disappointments, suffering, and setbacks. It is this hope that allows Mahmud to advance from this novel to the next, from this character to the next character, as he himself is also being transformed over time. The author's furtive desire creeps into all his novels. This taboo offspring unites these characters in realizing their ideal victory. Mahmud may have not been able to allow his characters to express this fact explicitly due to the sociopolitical conditions and limitations of his time, but rather could have them express it in a shroud of layers of hidden truth. He offers the clues here and there and expects his readership to peel off one layer at a time to see this reality.

The existence of Pirouz, a name which means "victory" suggests a symbolic meaning, a metaphor that aligns well with the author's belief system. It is as if the time has reached the "zero latitude," yet Mahmud has no intention of giving it all up yet and still hopes that the next generation will carry on the torch, even if his generation has failed to witness this dream. The closing scene of the novel is also very revealing as

Maedeh puts the bracelet on Baran's wrist, exactly at a time that the fish-eater *boushlambou* in the pond attacks a circle of fish and swallows them voraciously. Maedeh takes Pirouz from the hands of Baran while the sun sets in the horizon behind them. Baran is from the south, and as any southerner knows, *boushlmabou* is the kind of fish that eats off other fish; it is ironic for Nozar to ignore this important fact and let this fish swim among other fish in the pond. Knowing that Mahmud is well aware of his southern background, one has to ponder about his intension and his choice, unless he is trying to make a point, to convey his message in a clandestine manner.

Chapter Four

Language, Theme, and Plot in Mahmud's Work

Traditional Approach vs. Modern Approach

Mahmud is one of those writers who always strive to reach a certain maturity in their style. Contrary to the widespread image imparted by several critics who insist on Mahmud's straightforward and linear writing, one can argue that the majority of his works is dynamic in nature and offers various literary styles. For the most part, Mahmud's style of writing is consists of an intentional choice of short sentences, which at times may even consist of only a few words, sprinkled with a particular diction colored by the local dialect and idioms. Gaining experience of utilizing various styles of writing in his early short stories allowed Mahmud to achieve an articulate and lucid style of narration in his later novels. Using flashbacks and relying on memory is another technique that Mahmud often takes advantage of in order to delve into the past for brief instances or to introduce a new character, to make a point, or to simply highlight the importance of the events that have happened or are about to happen.

Looking at all of Mahmud's works, one can assume that they, by and large, follow one underlying structure and theme, which deals with the leading characters resisting corrupt power and exposing the injustice of the status quo. One cannot deny the consequence of various forms of censorships which have imposed a real restriction on the

modern literary production from the beginning of the 19th century up to this day. Often the works produced by the writers of Mahmud's generation were branded as "anti-government," "leftist," "deviant," and detrimental to "the youth's mind."¹⁹⁷ What is also worth mentioning is Mahmud's bold style of writing. No other writer, whether under the Shah's regime or the current regime, has been as bold as Mahmud going against the taboos set by his time. He is among those Iranian writers, who did not believe in "self-censorship" and wrote their novels as they thought ought to be written despite the controversy and criticism brought upon them whether by the governments or the critics and even their own peers. It is precisely this sense of boldness that has intrigued many critics to critique this aspect of Mahmud's writing.

The censorship, of course, was an ongoing political and cultural obstacle imposed by the tyrannical regimes under which Mahmud produced his works. Looking at Mahmud's novels, one may claim that he wrote his novels as a form of resistance against the tyranny, in particular that he strived to reflect the southern culture, dialects, and accents of a region he was familiar with. The debate on language, writing accents and writing in the regional dialects, is crucial to understanding this form of resistance literature. It therefore underscores the questions of the writer's background as well as issues of readership and audience. The decision to work with material in the dominant language, meaning, Persian, is conditioned by one of the purposes of this study, which is to introduce a minority literature to the majority of readers and critics. As an example,

¹⁹⁷ Due to the censorship of the Shah's regime, the literary works produced by the Iranian writers who would criticize the social conditions in their writing, were branded as "leftist" or "Marxist" writing.

works produced by the contemporary authors Samad Behrangi, Gholamhoseyn Sa'edi, and Reza Barahani come to mind, writers who chose to write in Persian, although Turkish is considered their native language.

In reality, posing the question of how far a writer is permitted to break his or her cultural boundary is a daunting question, a question which is mainly posed in the totalitarian and religious societies such as in Iran during the former regime of the Shah and today's Islamic Republic, not in the free world where the logical and characteristic nature of the world of fiction created by the author is respected and where the author is free to explore and delve into his or her own imagination as it is accepted. The choice should be made by the author herself, since this is rather a personal and artistic choice.

Another significant aspect of Mahmud's writing is his relationship with his readership, the writer/reader relationship, so to speak, that he usually establishes with his readers who follow him from one story to the next. Obviously, there is no such formal contract between any author and the reader and it is fully up to the writer to make this choice, for instance, to enter the sensitive part of the private lives of his characters. In other words, the reader has no choice but to accept the "writer's choice" and commit to reading the story from the beginning to the end, or else, close the book and stop in the middle of the reading.

The most important characteristic of this writer/reader contract is, for both the writer and the reader, how believable the stories of the world of fiction are. The fact is that the reader will know from the start whether or not the writer is honest and upfront

and has no intention to cover up for secrecy, in which case as Jalali puts it, “this much should be sufficient.”¹⁹⁸ Since the reader expects the writer to be frank and does not take the reader for a fool or attempt to manipulate her through intricate writing techniques to bring her to the starting point.¹⁹⁹ Writers like Mahmud, who are blunt and not afraid of going beyond the cultural boundaries, are honest and consider their readers as their own confidantes. Mahmud has no intention to temper his readers or take advantage of their trust and acceptance of the characters. If this mutual trust is established between the author and the reader, the reader will accept and believe even the most unbelievable episodes and scenes, therefore, there would be no doubts to keep the reader dwelling in disbelief.

Mahmud’s aptitude and tremendous skill of describing dynamic scenes allows the reader to participate as if she herself is right there in the heart of the action. The vibrant imagery, the fresh look at the new places, the sudden change in tone and the quick shift in mood and movements, all offer an opportunity for the events to surface fully, creating descriptive and memorable scenes. For instance, the style of writing used in the short story “The Strangers” is a form used only by a handful of writers of Mahmud’s generation such as Bahram Sadeghi and Bahman Sholevar. In “The Strangers” the narrator has gone beyond the traditional style role of narration and like an ubiquitous

¹⁹⁸ Jalali, F. *Baran bar Zamin-e Sukhteh*, 238.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 239.

shadow, is present in the heart of the story and speaks directly to each one of the characters, and even expresses his sympathy for them or offers advice.²⁰⁰

“Get up! Nanneh Amru, get up!” the narrator calls out to the mourning mother, “Here, take this twenty tomans²⁰¹ and spend it on something!” Nanneh Amru, however, does not move, she does not even say a word, she only stares into the night. “Aren’t you afraid, Nanneh Amru?” asks the narrator again this time. “Yes, I am afraid,” answers Nanneh Amru. “So, then get up!” responds the narrator, urging the character to get up and do something.²⁰²

At first glance, this monologue may appear as if Nanneh Amru is having a conversation with herself and it is her inner-voice that talks to her, offering her solace and reconciliation, but paying closer attention, one can clearly see that this cannot be her inner voice. If that were the case, the inner voice would not have named the character, addressing her by “*Nanneh jaan*” but rather simply as “you” as it is commonly used in such monologues. Another good example which confirms this concept is when Nanneh Amru coughs and the narrator asks her, “You have a cold, Nanneh Amru?” to which the character replies “Yes.” The narrator, feeling sympathy for the character, expresses his concerns by offering suggestions such as, “Don’t leave the house, Nanneh! Just start a

²⁰⁰ Jalali, F. *Baran bar Zamin-e Sukhteh*, 240.

²⁰¹ Ibid, 241.

²⁰² Ibid, 241.

brazier of hot coal, make some homemade remedy and drink it at once. In this cold, make yourself a cup of tea; it'll do you good.”²⁰³

This interaction and the narrator's intervention occur even with other characters, in particular where the role of the narrator becomes more that of a caring person who wants to give advice or make confrontations. At times, he plays the role of the protector, wanting to protect his characters from other evil characters in the story. As if it is his duty, the narrator reprimands the conniving Sergeant Eidi: “Why do you lead on the old man and give him false hopes, Sergeant Eidi?”²⁰⁴ the narrator tells him in a reprimanding voice. Making use of this form of literary technique, of course, works perfectly in the short stories since it allows the author to use short sentences that are the reflection of the inner thoughts of each character. And the provided clues and hints here and there set the mood that something is at stake, an element that often takes the reader by surprise. Mahmud successfully applies this technique in this short story, a fact that suggests he has no particular objection to exploring this type of experimental writing.

The second aspect of this work is the fact that the author/narrator pays special attention to the internal thoughts of his characters, which in itself is an innovative method for him used rarely in Mahmud's other works that are mainly concerned with the description of an external world in which the characters are formed. In addition to the use of local color and regional dialects, the narrator takes the reader deep into the stray thoughts and random emotions that torment the characters. In other words, the reader

²⁰³ Jalali, F. Baran bar Zamin-e Sukhteh, 242.

²⁰⁴ Ibid, 243.

finds herself inside the heads of the characters and feels their pain, suffering, and joy as they feel them. These monologues, distractions, torments, and anxious emotions, not only enrich the language of the story and its complexity, but also manifest themselves in unforgettable characters.

Similarly, the short story “Visit” unravels itself in the form of many flashbacks and the technique of streams of consciousness, dealing with themes of contrast drawn by binary oppositions. Themes such as “good and evil,” the clash of the “traditional and modern life” influenced by machines and industry, the disparity “between old and the young,” the conflict between self and others, the conflict of human being with himself, and the loneliness of one’s soul are all the core of this collection of short stories.

In the enticing and thought-provoking story of “The Return,” once again, Mahmud revisits his model protagonist, Khaled, the young narrator of *The Neighbors*, this time as a thirty-one year old Goshtasb or Shasb for short. This is the longest story of the collection *The Strangers*. As noted by many critics, the theme that preoccupies Mahmud the most is “making a choice” and “taking sides.” The narrator and even many of the characters of Mahmud’s novels are faced to make a deliberate choice whether to be on the side of the “power” or the “powerless.” In *The Neighbors*, for instance, this choice is very predominant as there is no grey line and everything is either black or white. Therefore, the ever-present character with his familiar social critical voice, this narrator/author character will surface and the reader revisits him again in the story “Az Deltangi” [Homesickness] in the collection of short stories *Za’eri Zir-e Baran* [A pilgrim

Under the Rain] (1967). And later, he reappears in the novel *The Tale of a City*, in which the protagonist's name is still "Khaled" though a few years older and now an educated officer condemned to exile in the isolated port city, Bandar Lengeh, in the aftermath of the 1953 *coup d'état*.

Having served five years of exile in an idle harbor city, he is finally free to return home, to his beloved city of Ahvaz. His thoughts are with his family and the kinds of things he plans to do. The entire drive to Ahvaz passes in a monologue, at times confusing and inexplicable. It takes a while for the reader to get used to this innovative style of Mahmud, especially for those faithful readers unaccustomed to this new style of writing. Once this barrier is lifted, however, the reader is introduced quickly to the historical linear recounting style of Mahmud, a style he aims to achieve. What sets this work apart is techniques such as the use of stream of consciousness and monologue. While on the bus, the narrator ponders his cousin's words of advice offered in his letters, reminding the narrator of his intelligence and capabilities as he brings him up to date about the country's progress, especially his hometown, Ahvaz, and encouraging him to make a new start in his life.

Themes and issues such as culture shock, rapid changes, isolation, betrayals, disappointment, melancholy, and self-examination are the predominant themes found in the story of "The Return." Once at home, the narrator is surrounded by many new changes: the country is climbing up the ladder of progress, new oil companies and financial institutes are mushrooming overnight. In his absence, life has moved on and

people, now abandoning their political ideals, are more concerned with making money and becoming rich overnight. Even those individuals who have gone to Kuwait and Dubai in search of menial jobs, have returned to the homeland to find lucrative work at home. Soon, Goshtasb finds himself in search of old friends to rekindle old friendships, visiting Gholam, his childhood friend and former comrade, for instance. The reader is informed that Gholam has signed a letter of repentance, regretting his affiliation with any political parties, a letter that had granted him his freedom by the means of cooperating with the secret police, SAVAK. What is more, he has managed to make himself a comfortable life and start a lucrative business. While Gholam's actions cause the narrator anger and disgust, despite his disappointment he still expresses sympathy for Gholam and tries to keep in mind his impoverished past life.²⁰⁵ Considering Gholam's unfortunate and miserable childhood and how he was faced with making ends meet, the narrator transforms this feeling of sympathy, though not justified, to the reader. This is an important recurring element found in all of Mahmud's works, where the working class is forgiven for its shortcoming and mistakes.

Not only is Goshtasb faced with the changes that have reshaped the public image of his country and his hometown, but also with many changes that have taken place in his absence in his own family. His father, Karun (ironically, the name of the river which runs through the southern part of Iran), now aged, is ever irritable and temperamental. His mother, Atri, older and weaker than before, seems so inaccessible and lost in her own

²⁰⁵ "The Return", 134-135.

thoughts now; his brother, Shahru, preparing himself for the university entrance examinations, and his sister, who now, is blossoming into a young lady. In addition, there is his grandmother whose deteriorating memory does not allow her to retrace time. Next to all this, there is the presence of an “old ram” that was bought to be sacrificed in honor of Goshtasb’s freedom; five years later, the animal, too, has grown old and useless and now has become an extended family member, tied up to a tree trunk in the courtyard.²⁰⁶

As relatives and acquaintances come to visit Goshtasb, welcoming him into his newly found world of freedom, each tries to suggest a new line of profession so that he would begin working and feeling “normal” again. Eventually, with the help of his uncle’s friend, Hajj Malek, Goshtasb finds a job in one of the recently established and flourishing banks, but the minute Goshtasb walks inside the bank, he is faced with Mohtasham, the director of the bank. Of course, the reader soon finds out that Mohtasham is none other than Safdar himself, who in the past has exposed the identity of one of Goshtasb’s comrades for possession of books banned by the government, and it has cost him imprisonment. This encounter conjures up enormous resentment and disgust in Goshtasb, especially that one of the job requirements is not to have any records of imprisonment and past political affiliations. Annoyed and disappointed, he decides to leave the bank without having done the interview.

²⁰⁶ Mahmud, A. “The Return,” 36.

Later, we see Goshtasb in a visit with his old friend, Gholam. When Goshtasb confronts Gholam in confessing his act of betrayal, tearful Gholam recounts the reason why he had to abandon his ideals and cooperate with the SAVAK. He recalls the torture, his castration, and the fact that he had no choice but to expose his comrades' safe house, in which Goshtasb lived and thus got arrested. He tells the narrator that the only thing left for him now is to be obsessed with making more and more money.²⁰⁷

After this encounter, Goshtasb's scope of thoughts broadens even more and he finds himself fighting an inner battle. On one hand, he feels that Gholam merely justifies his betrayal, but on the other hand, he cannot ignore Gholam's despair imposed on him through torture, his constant crying, and troubled soul. This issue, coupled with the existing records of his political past, which prohibits him from working in the government employment, is not the only problem that preoccupies Goshtasb's mind. Somehow, the bogus news of Goshtasb's attack on Mohtasham circulates and reaches Karun, Goshtasb's father, who seems to reprimand his son at any little chance he gets. Feeling embarrassed and frustrated that he has not been able to help his family financially, he falls into yet another case of depression. His temporary arrest by SAVAK and his interrogation by Lieutenant Qane'ie, followed by his order of shaving Goshtasb's mustache, is the climax of his humiliation, which causes him to carry out his secret plan in setting fire to the Lieutenant's car with his dog in it.

²⁰⁷ Mahmud, A. "The Return," 42-44.

Thereafter, Goshtasb finds himself hiding in his room as he falls more and more into his depression and a battle with himself to the point of madness. Simultaneously, another piece of news begins to circulate: the assassination of an American envoy and a high ranking security officer. This news, of course, brings suspicion and worry to family members who try to come up with a solution for Goshtasb's madness. Goshtasb, hearing this news from behind the closed door, ignores them and continues with his tormented thoughts; he is determined to spoil Gholam's plan in helping him.²⁰⁸

According to Ojakians "The Return" is an extraordinary and unforgettable literary work, which has been very successful in depicting various issues.²⁰⁹ Defeated ideals, the issue of betrayals, the social and political pressure, and the unfortunate outcomes the protagonist must endure, all are rendered with a literary skill intertwined with a psychological twist that uncovers the inner thoughts of the protagonist, Goshtasb. He is a hero who does not accept the failure of his ideals and continues to remain faithful. As a result, he suffers from a self-alienation,²¹⁰ and soon his developing emotional failure drives him to madness and self-destruction. The author, from the very beginning of the story, by pointing out the issue of betrayal, sets up the mood to tell his readers what is at stake. Gradually, he leads the reader in the direction of the protagonist's self-destruction, his troubled mind, and his disturbing thoughts.

²⁰⁸ Mahmud, A. "The Return," 136.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 137

²¹⁰ In Persian (از خود بیگانگی).

The narrator thus cautions the reader of existing contradictions and the binary oppositions which torment his thoughts from the very beginning, when he gets on the bus to return home. In essence, the narrator is split into two characters, one, the “external” and “physical” Goshtasb, who tries to fit in, tries to find a job and help his struggling family, the other, the “internal” Goshtasb, who battles with the essence of life itself, and asks himself philosophical questions to make sense of life and the world around him, the existence of man and his relation to the world, and the purpose of him being put on the planet.

Another major difference, which sets this story apart from Mahmud’s other works is the use of binary opposition and the internal conflict, which reminds the reader of Sadegh Hedayat’s *The Blind Owl*.²¹¹ And perhaps the author was influenced by Hedayat’s mysterious and melancholic style of writing at the time he wrote this novella. This is, of course, not to undermine Mahmud’s work and the authenticity of his idea, not to mention his direct real-life experiences after returning home from a five-year exile.

“The Return” is a unique work and by no means should be interpreted as an imitation of another style, especially since this work offers witty and funny scenes absent in *The Blind Owl*. The author successfully creates a story sprinkled with amusing scenes about each member of the family, in particular the sons-in-law, the witty cousin, and a grandmother who has lost her memory to balance out the heaviness and ominous scenes

²¹¹ The Blind Owl (1937) (in Persian: Buf-e kur) is considered one of the most celebrated literary work of 20th century Iran. It is the story of an unnamed pen case painter, the narrator, who reveals his murderous confessions to the shadow on his wall resembling an owl, in a dreamlike dialog. His confessions do not follow a linear progression of events and often repeat and layer themselves thematically, thus lending to the open-ended nature of interpretation of the story.

of the dead-end destiny of a marginalized hero. These lighthearted moments allow the reader to breathe out, tasting this misery only in small doses before the entire tragedy unravels itself.

Nevertheless, it may take a while for the reader who is not used to Mahmud's type of experimental writing, but soon the story takes over and the reader is pulled into the heart of the action and can easily follow the plotline. Time and again, the narrator reminds himself that he must go on with his life just like the rest of the people who manage to do so. As he reevaluates his current situation, he struggles to find answers that could justify his defeated ideals, so he begins analyzing and dissecting people's actions and behaviors and ponders whether traitors like Gholam, the government officials, the security officers, or even the Lieutenant himself, should be punished or forgiven.²¹²

The solitude and isolation, the main troubles he feels imposed on him, are the most dreadful things he has to endure. On one hand, he does not want to compromise his ideals and wants to be on the side of the oppressed, on the side of the powerless, yet on the other hand, finding himself marginalized and labeled as the "wrongdoer" and "traitor" who has betrayed his country by taking part in the political dissent against the government, and to top it off, turned into a useless madman, is just unbearable. He feels all doors closing on him one by one as he finds himself under the constant watchful eyes of the secret police. In order to show these troubling factors, Mahmud has made use of various practical techniques to convey the characters' inner dilemma. Introducing several

²¹² Mahmud, A. "The Return," 134-135.

characters as they mold and shape around the protagonist help the reader to see Goshtasb's internal monologue, his conflicting dreams and nightmares, at times surrealistic and grotesque, and his gradual mental breakdown.

Setting up the socio-political atmosphere and the direct interaction of the narrator is another skillful technique, which has helped make this novella a success and a great literary work. In general, the style of writing, the use of flashbacks, and internal monologue, and stream of consciousness, all reveals the skill of the writer in creating a successful story. At the same time, using multiple literary techniques employed in this story may affect the fluency of the storyline, especially when the narrator himself interferes directly and speaks to the characters. At times, the plot becomes confusing, as who is talking to whom, whether this is the inner voice of the character who has strangely a monologue with himself, or a dialogue between a character and the narrator or between various characters.

As in the case of the dialogue with Nanneh Amru, the narrator often interferes with the characters, offering them advice, feeling sympathy for them, and the reader feels his presence like a shadow following the characters. Mahmud has introduced his readers to a completely different form of the internal monologue, where the character addresses this "inner voice" in second person, as "you," as if talking to oneself. Here, this omniscient point of view no longer just reports and reveals the internal train of thoughts of the character speaking in the third person, but rather, like a schizophrenic friend follows the character intermittently and talks to him, especially at the times of conflict

when the characters desperately seek vital sympathy and hope. As strange as this notion may sound, at times, the author succeeds in conjuring up a provoking thought: just like a prophet who walks in the company of the Creator, the writer, too, here walks in the company of his characters, expressing freely his sympathy for his own creation, especially those characters drawn from his own life experience who are closer to his heart.

The description of the final scene and the dreams of Goshtasb's mother, Atri, and his father, Karun, on the eve of the final incident challenges the reader's understanding ever more. The cut-off branches of the lotus tree, which is as old as Goshtasb himself, and the aging, tied up ram trapped within the branches, all the while the description of Goshtasb's death, perhaps a suicide by hanging himself from the ceiling, all suggest the cry for help of a hero who is falling hard to the abyss of his misery.

To reinstate what Ojakians has stated,²¹³ the collection story of "*The Visit*" and in particular the story of "The Return" reveals the dynamic nature and the search of author/narrator for new experiences and new style of writing, stepping away from the boundary of the already established linear style of writing that his readership is accustomed to. Rather than employing the straight-forward technique of storytelling, and engaged in portraying the external details, here Mahmud has introduced his readers to an innovative schizophrenic god/narrator/creator, using perpetual monologue, detailing the troubled mind and the anxious thoughts of the characters to show the greed and

²¹³ Ojakians, A. *A Critique of the Fiction of Esmail' Fasih and stories by Ahmad Mahmud, Zoya Pirzad, Amir Hossein Cheheltan, and Fattaneh Haj Sayyed Javadi* (2007), 142.

wickedness of the people who are now preoccupied with making money. This is the portrait of a society after the fall of its ideals, after the fall of its heroes and after the *coup d'etat* and the rise of a new tyrannical government, the “glorious reign” of the Shah in the fifties and sixties.²¹⁴

The Neighbors

Among the major themes of this celebrated novel are the British domination and the Iranian nation's control over its natural resources, in particular oil and its production and revenues, and the presence and interference of foreign forces in Iran, especially in the southern province of Khuzestan, the political awareness of both young Khaled, the protagonist, and the nation, their struggle for self-recognition and identity.

Many critics have claimed *The Neighbors* as Mahmud's best novel, and perhaps his most recognized novel. Ordinarily, it is *The Neighbors* that comes to mind when one hears Mahmud's name, although, his sequel novel *The Tale of a City* and the short story “The Return” have, by far, surpassed *The Neighbors* in terms of style and literary techniques applied. While *The Neighbors* was reprinted four times through 1977, unfortunately, it was not allowed to be republished after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Nevertheless, this interruption did not stop the book from being read widely and discussed in the literary circle, and according to critics such as Dastghayb and Jalali, “the novel was one of the modern Iranian fiction that attracted a wide readership and went

²¹⁴ Ojakians, A. *A Critique of the Fiction of Esmail Fasih and stories by Ahmad Mahmud, Zoya Pirzad, Amir Hossein Cheheltan, and Fattaneh Haj Sayyed Javadi* (2007), 145.

from hand to hand.”²¹⁵ Considering the time of its publication, in the early 70s, when censorship was severe under the Shah’s regime and this type of literary production was branded as “antigovernment” material, it is astounding that the book was reprinted four times before being banned. Many readers have expected this book to be published after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, a time which, in essence, was expected to be more tolerable compared to the oppressive Shah’s regime, and Mahmud now already a well established author who has created and given his readers a masterpiece, yet the novel was never republished. Despite the fact that all his succeeding novels, some in great number of copies, were published and reprinted many times, ironically, the readers never saw the reprint of *The Neighbors*.

Many critics, of course, have expressed contradictory opinions about why this novel was not allowed to be republished after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, and many have suggested it was for the reason of its descriptive sexual imagery between a young boy and a married woman, a socially and religiously taboo relationship. This forbidden affair, which is considered adultery, is frowned upon and necessitates a harsh punishment such as execution and death by stoning, a pre-Islamic practice often carried out by the new Iranian government after the revolution, to punish those individuals, in particular married women, who engaged in this sort of forbidden act of intimacy. Others have reasoned that the book was banned due to the author’s political views and his former association with the Tudeh communist party, which is reflected as one of the significant

²¹⁵ Jalali, F. *Baran bar Zamin-e Sukhteh*, 33-35, 68.

underlying themes in the novel. On the other hand, some critics have expressed concerns that contemporary work of fiction, in general, and *The Neighbors*, in particular, has never been given the deserved attention to overcome those kinds of barriers, and to allow the writer to explore beyond the boundaries of taboos prohibited by social rules. Critics such as Jalali argue that the book was not republished mainly due to Mahmud's lack of interest in pursuing the publication of the novel.²¹⁶ Jalali believes that, compared to the writers of his generation, Mahmud had an introverted personality and did not pay much attention to the public commotion of literary circles, that he barely did any interviews, and that his main focus was to write in his own seclusion. Jalali maintains that Mahmud was not only hardly ever present in the literary circles, but also even if he were to express his opinion about literature, works of fiction, school of thought, or various writing styles and techniques, he shared these thoughts only in his circle of close friends, but not openly in public.²¹⁷

It is ironic that despite his public shyness he was one of the most prolific writers of contemporary Iranian fiction, and that he chose to be so frank and bold in his books, disregarding commonly practiced self-censorship. He was also a writer who was very much annoyed by those writers obsessed with form and style of writing, as Jalali states, "He thought of these writers as pest who cause more damage to work of fiction than

²¹⁶ Jalali, F. *Baran bar Zamin-e Sukhteh*, 33-35, 68.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

contribute.”²¹⁸ He was particularly annoyed by novice fiction writers who insisted on experimental forms.

With regard to *The Neighbors* Mahmud knew where exactly the problem lied in not allowing the novel to be republished in the Islamic Republic. He knew well that the relationship between young Khaled and Bolur Khanom, an older married woman who openly expressed her sexual desires, could not be a subject understood in his time and particularly at a time when the focus was on this newly found Islamic national identity after revolution. As Mahmud himself expresses in his interview, he was disheartened by the fact that the Islamic Republic categorized this novel as “vulgar,” “trivial,” and “ideologically leftist.”²¹⁹

Nevertheless, the subject and the nature of this relationship, forbidden or otherwise, is discussed here as part of the critiques of *The Neighbors*. Any critic who would wish to omit this part, not only has not understood the true intention of Mahmud but also could not critique the novel fully without any prejudice and fear of being branded as “vulgar.” Especially, that this “taboo relationship” itself and the existence of Bolur Khanom is so tightly woven into the formation of the novel and the subversive central character, Khaled, that it is simply impossible to ignore this element of the novel. Bolur Khanom is as unforgettable as the famous female characters of modern Iranian fiction, characters such as Zari of *Sauvushun*,²²⁰ Ahu Khanom of *Ahu Khanom*’s

²¹⁸ Jalali, F. *Baran bar Zamin-e Sukhteh*, 33-35.

²¹⁹ Ibid, 36.

²²⁰ The leading female character in *Sauvushun*, a contemporary novel by Simin Daneshvar. The story unfolds the life of a family in Shiraz faced with the temporary foreign occupation of Iran during World War

Husband,²²¹ and Maral of *Kelidar*.²²² The question should not be why Mahmud did not consider removing this part of his novel in order for the book to be republished, as some critics have recommended he should have done, but the question one should pose is to what extent can a writer challenge the existing taboos and go beyond his or her cultural boundaries to be socially realistic. As we have seen examples of these taboo relationships in other works by contemporary Iranian writers, such as Hedayat, are we to question the creation of “the Whore” or “Lakkateh,”²²³ and the “Ethereal Girl”²²⁴ in the *Blind Owl*, as well as the descriptive sexual desires of the narrator himself? If we were to expect Mahmud to purge Bolur Khanom out of *The Neighbors*, how would we justify the existence of the scenes such as the central character of *The Blind Owl* sleeping with a dead body of the Ethereal Girl? Other examples that come to mind are the sexual scenes rendered in Chubak’s *The Patient Stone* or the scenes of sexual encounters in Golshiri’s

II as Zari, the matriarch of the family struggles to protect her family. *Savushun* is considered one of the most influential modern fiction written in Persian as Daneshvar creatively has used folklore and myth in writing this novel.

²²¹ Written in Persian by Ali Mohammad Afghani (1961), it tells the story of a family, whose patriarch, Sayyed Miran Saraie marries a second wife, Homa, causing his first wife, Ahu Khanom, anguish and pain. The story unfolds the everyday’s life of this three characters as they struggle to live side by side in a household.

²²² *Kelidar* (1977 to 1984) is considered one of the most famous modern Persian novels written by Mahmud Dowlatabadi. The novel consist of ten books and is nearly three thousand pages and in five volumes. The author has used Folklore in writing *Kelidar* and has been translated in various languages. Kelidar is the name of a mountain and a village in Khorasan where the events of the novel take place. The story is about the life of a Kurdish family in Sabzevar, Khorasan, who undergo the hostility of neighboring villagers despite the similarity of their culture. It is set against the highly charged political climate in Iran after World War II. And Maral is the daring and charming central female character of the novel.

²²³ She is the female character of *The Blind Owl* who is depicted as “half sister/wife/whore” in the novel.

²²⁴ She is the imaginary, unattainable, beautiful female character in *The Blind Owl*. The narrator often dreams of her or imagines her being in his presence.

Jinn Nameh [The Book of Genies] (1998).²²⁵ Although, Golshiri's *Jinn Nameh* received relative attention from critics and equally many readers even beyond the borders of Iran, nevertheless, it suffered the same destiny as *The Neighbors* of not being allowed to be published in the Islamic Republic. Ironically, the critics have not questioned the portrayal of the relationship between the central male character, Hossein and the female character, Malih, who is not officially a prostitute, but has multiple relationships with men by the means of practicing "temporary marriage" for a night or even an hour.²²⁶

Another important key factor that may be the prerequisite of whether or not the author would want or choose to challenge the set traditions or the cultural boundaries is the historical and political condition and the time to which the writer belongs. It is important to consider in what political and social period the writer lives and what the significant dynamics of his society are. A writer should know how open his society is to these unwritten social conventions. For these reasons, a critic should also consider the social circumstances, limitation of his time, and the historical period to which the writer belongs. Therefore, to discuss and understand the relationship between Khaled and Bolur Khanom, we as readers should also familiarize ourselves with Mahmud's time and place in order to evaluate his works without any prejudice, especially, now, after forty years

²²⁵ This novel has not received publication's permission in Iran. It tells the story of the male character, Hossein, whose obsession with the capturing jinn preoccupies his thoughts. Maliheh is the female character who maintains a sexual relationship with various men by the means of legally accepted "temporary marriages" to make a living. Although Hossein loves her but struggles to convince himself to marry her.

²²⁶ It is believed that Shi'e Islam allows men to marry a women for a short period of time, in order to have a legal and religiously appropriate sexual relationship with a woman. The term used in Iran is called "*sigheh*" and the duration of the marriage could be as short as one hour or a set period of time and years. The man has to also perform all his financial obligations and duties.

since this book was initially published. Consequently, the critics too need to consider the socio-political condition of the time when the novel was originally written, otherwise, as Jalali states, “the critics may be unfair and biased.”²²⁷

In a letter addressed to Dastghayb,²²⁸ Mahmud stated that he wrote the first draft of *The Neighbors*, as a novel, of course, for the first time between 1951-53 in Ahvaz and it was not published until 1974 by the intervention of Ebrahim Yunesi who urged Amir Kabir Publisher to publish the novel. Thus, we can assume that there was at least no social restriction on the author creating such characters as Bolur Khanom and Khaled. From the very first page, the reader is pulled into the heart of the story with the sound of Bolur Khanom’s screaming as she takes blow after blows from her husband, Aman Agha. Thus, from the very beginning, Mahmud draws the attention of his readers and sets the mood that the reader ought to expect the unexpected and unacceptable. Khaled too, given his age and understanding, reveals his relationship with this married woman without knowing the extent of appropriateness of this relationship. Not only that, in doing so, both writer and narrator may attempt to depict the generally known, whether true or otherwise, the transparency of the southern people as Mahmud was familiar with. For instance, Khaled’s mother, clearly aware of her son’s relationship with this woman, never confronts Bolur Khanom nor does she attempt to have a conversation with her or her son about the matter. On the contrary, her lack of initiative leads the reader to believe that

²²⁷ Jalali, F. *Baran bar Zamin-e Sukhteh*, 40.

²²⁸ *Didar Ba Ahmad Mahmud* [A visit with Ahmad Mahmud], 163. (The letter was addressed as Teer 1370/June 1981).

even Khaled's mother feels sympathy for Bolur Khanom who is the victim of her abusive husband. In addition to Khaled's mother, other neighbors such as Banu and Ebram, who are suspicious of this relationship, nonetheless, disregard the matter and they mention it only in passing, if ever.²²⁹

Moreover, communicating with his readers in this manner, the narrator signals that what is being revealed may be out of the ordinary, and provides opportunities for the reader to decide for herself how to read between the lines and how to go beyond the ordinary sexual images. By describing the color of the walls in Bolur Khanom's room, the kind of food Aman Aqa brings home for dinner, the mouthwatering smell of stew, Khaled describes the dissimilarity between his life and other neighbors and the degree of poverty even within the entire house shared by many tenants divided only by a wall.²³⁰ In describing the interior of Bolur Khanom's room in details such as "the blue silk of her mantelpiece," "the tulle-woven curtains," the kind of details that may not be of any importance to the young adolescent narrator, the narrator reveals a certain secrecy and tranquility that the room itself offers in contrast to the constant threats and the uproar of Aman Aqa. Thus, the story not only offers momentum, but also feeds the reader's curiosity in prying behind a closed door. In fact, this is a technique Mahmud often makes use of in many of the scenes throughout the novel, for instance a peek from behind a closed door; a look from within the cracks in a door; a look through a hole in the wall; a

²²⁹ Mahmud, A. *The Neighbors*, 61, 65-66.

²³⁰ This difference is more explicitly rendered in scenes where Khaled visits Bolur Khanom and as he describes in details the interiors of Bolur Khanom's room, for instance on page 14.

look from inside to the outside world, or vice versa. This technique, which is an old literary technique, allows Mahmud to entice his readers to spy on various characters and their private lives and perhaps to experience this discovery simultaneously with the narrator.

In juxtaposition with Bolur Khanom, the narrator provides a picture of a male character, Gholam Ali Khan, who although a married man brings prostitutes to his house in the absence of his wife. Ironically, the critics hardly ever pointed out this socially and religiously inappropriate relationship, perhaps simply because this is a male character and Bolur Khanom is a female character.

In general, in Mahmud's stories, the narrator's mission is to allow the characters shape on their own and speak for themselves. As an example, we can mention Hajar's husband, Naser Davani, as he returns home from Kuwait city, and the way he sizes up Hajar "swaying her buttocks." The reader experiences the character's desire for his wife through the eyes of the young narrator without him providing much details. Or in other scene, when Cousin Gholam comes to visit Khaled's mother, and tries, in a conniving way, to swindle money from Khaled's mother, or the way he looks at Bolur Khanom, all reveals the sharp eyes of a young curious character. Contrary to several critics of portrayal of Bolur Khanom as a "prostitute," she does not show any interest in Cousin Gholam or any other men. Khaled is the only man she is interested in. The narrator goes so far with this relationship that he does not have a clear understanding of the existing morals and ethics of his society. Not even when Ebram tells him that this is an act of *zena*,

(adultery), an act against religion. His first awareness is when he poses this question, “Does Bolur Khanom know that *this* is *zena*? She must know since she’s a married woman.”²³¹ Given the circumstances, it is clear that Khaled would not know the degree of inappropriateness of this relationship until later, when he begins to value Aman Aqa’s treating him with kindness. It is only then that he questions his own actions and feels ashamed of going over to Bolur Khanom in the middle of the night. In his mind, this relationship should be ended solely for the sake of Aman Aqa not because the tradition disapproves it or the religion bans it.

From this point onward, his growing awareness about what is right and what is wrong determines his action. He begins to feel guilty to have a relationship with Aman Aqa’s wife, because he bailed him out of the jail, accordingly, he feels both loyal and ashamed to continue with this sexual relationship. It is his conscience that warns him, not the social and religious restrictions or fear of God’s punishments and afterlife, but rather based on his understanding of human morality. The course of his action and the development of his awareness is a logical process. The reader will see the development of his gradual awareness expand as he steps even beyond his own house to the familiar streets of his neighborhood, and as he gets involved with young political activists and later comes in contact with many prisoners while in prison. He is no longer fearful that the jinn in his father’s Asrar-e Ghasemi’s book will expose his relationship with Bolur Khanom. Khaled’s father, Ussa Haddad, is a traditional man with no education yes

²³¹ Mahmud, A. *The Neighbors*, 42.

fascinated by the realm of the unknown. He is superstitious and tells his son that the jinn in this book will reveal all the wrongdoing of a person.

Even though Khaled does not openly protest or argue with his father for his superstitious belief, he does not believe in them either. He feels compassion for his father and his empty hands. When Bolur Khanom continues to seduce him, he expresses that he no longer has a strong desire but rather he feels confused and hesitant, to the point that finally he rejects her in an abrupt manner. Just like his generation, Mahmud is disappointed in “fathers” and their backward traditions. He knows he cannot rely on them for guidelines, and like the sons of his generation, he, too, turns his back on the blind traditions of the fathers and looks instead to the young people and their new ideals. Although he feels sympathy, he does not believe that fathers like Ussa Haddad, with their failed ideas, are a good source of inspiration to rely on. These fathers will be only an obstacle in the way of their sons, encouraging them only to keep quiet or passively accept the will of God and do not dare to challenge authority. The reader will witness this development further in the story of “The Return” where the father constantly disapproves of, criticizes, and belittles his son, Goshtasb, for pursuing his failed ideals.

Khaled, however, now is more distant from the heavenly punishment and closer to the earthly retribution. He searches for a justification, for setting his standards on earth, among mankind and their many sets of values. Thus, he acquires a logic that disapproves of his relationship with Bolur Khanom. It is at this point that the reader notices the first spark of change in him; he is no longer that innocent, playful misfit, but a young boy,

who is beginning to become an intellectual adolescence. It is rather a human concern that has nothing to do with otherworldly punishment. This observation by itself, in essence, is rather a modernist approach to distance one from the set tradition. Undoubtedly, Mahmud succeeds in depicting this intellectual development in action without overwhelming the reader with the teaching of the morals and what is good and what is evil. As Jalali states, "He has incorporated this method throughout the story so skillfully as if dissolving sugar in water so that hardly anyone has noticed this change in the character's growth and intellectual development."²³²

The Neighbors could be compared to a triangle. At one angle we can locate Khaled's physical development and his adolescent years, at another angle we can see Khaled's transformation and his sense of political and social development, which is the most important angle of the story, and at the last angle, we can see the clash and conflict between tradition and modernity. In terms of magnitude, the political evolution takes a good two-third of the story, in which he gets involved with the political activists, his imprisonment, and the actions and events that take place in prison.

It is also worthy of note that Mahmud is among those writers who pays close attention to the topics of political events, directly or indirectly, in all his works, whether in novels or short stories. The political upheavals in modern Iranian history are the main preoccupation of Mahmud, which are depicted as the backdrop of his novels. Thus, the background of *The Neighbors* consists of events that took place in 1952-54, the events

²³² Jalali, F. *Baran bar Zamin-e Sukhteh*, 93.

that mainly dealt with the socio-political issues and the economic tensions caused by the nationalization of the oil industry. Moreover, the political parties' opposition, especially the communist party Tudeh, against the former regime of Mohammad Reza Shah, coupled with the political and economic intrusion of the British, and finally the collapse of Dr. Mossaddeq's cabinet, are the main themes of this novel. Parallel to the mentioned background, the reader follows the transformation of a young boy as his political understanding takes shape throughout the novel.

The experience of utilizing various style of writing in his early short stories allowed Mahmud to achieve a very articulate and lucid style of narration in *The Neighbors*. Using flashbacks and relying on memory, he takes advantage of delving into the past for brief instances to introduce a new character, to make a point, or simply to put an emphasis on the importance of the events that have happened, or are about to happen. This use of technique is very much aligned with the young curious and innocent yet detail-oriented protagonist of this story. From the very beginning, Khaled is introduced as a curious creature. His actions are as risky as getting involved with a married woman or as daring as getting involved with a group of young activists such as Shafaq, Bidar, and Pendar.

Abandoning the technique of omniscient point of view, Mahmud uses the first-person, the fresh point of view of an innocent character, Khaled, through his growing perspective of life, the reader, too, grows with him and experiences this transformation. The reader becomes excited, frightened, disappointed, and hopeful with Khaled, and

becomes frustrated and irritated as Khaled is thrown from one situation to the next. Although, a very effective technique, Ojakians believes that the repeated use of “this technique may be redundant and unnecessary which results in slowing the flow of the story as if the story is being reported rather being told.”²³³

The author insists on using short sentences, fit for the humble personality of the narrator who uses an unassuming language. However, at times, the author’s voice interferes with the narrator’s voice, the language becomes very sophisticated and mature, as if the author puts words into the mouth of the narrator. This may take away the natural course of the narration and weakens the work.

In addition to the short sentences, the witty and sharp language sprinkled in various scenes conjures up lighthearted feelings in the readers. Use of various accents and local dialects, for instance, gives the work a local color, but also adds to the richness of the language, which reveals the mischievousness and cleverness of the young narrator. One of the most detailed and captivating scenes is the scene of Banu’s wedding preparation and Rezvan flirting with the cook, a detail that leads up to her accidental death at the hand of Rahim the Donkey-Keeper.²³⁴ Although, there are many excellent examples, the most immediate ones that may worth mentioning is the descriptive scenes of Banu and Karam’s wedding and Rezvan’s accidental murder scene, where the rhythm develops rapidly, keeping the reader fully engaged.

²³³ Ojakians, A, *A Critique of the Fiction of Esmail Fasih, and stories by Ahmad Mahmud, Zoya Pirzad, Amir Hossein Chegeltan and Fatteneh Haj Seyyed Javadi* (Vol. Supplement No. 30), (Tehran: Farhangestan-e zaban va adab-e Farsi, 2007), 153.

²³⁴ Mahmud, A. *The Neighbors*, 246.

It is fascinating to see how various tangible factors intertwine: the harmony between musical instruments such as *sorna* and *daf*, the smoke rising from a pipe, mixed with the elements of fire and boiling water, Sanam's quick movements of hands and feet as she dances to the music, the clapping of children, the opening and closing mouth of Rahim the Donkey-Keeper as Rezvan pounds on his chest, her black hair falling over her shoulder, the rising sound of the *sorna* as the water comes to a boil and the rice comes to a bubbling formation, and again Rahim's anger and Rezvan's rising voice, and the rising red and orange flames from under the copper pots, all culminate in the effect of foretelling of something troublesome about to happen. A culmination of anger, loud music, blazing flames and boiling water, which all comes to an end by Rezvan's choked voice, Rahim's silence, and boiling water over the fire, quieting down of the sound of the *sorna*, is a troublesome silence. Nothing unnatural or artificial is seen in this scene, everything rises and falls harmoniously just like a symphony. This scene, and others to follow, provokes the reader's curiosity and invites her to pause, reread, and reevaluate the scene to feel the depth of a catastrophe that just happened.

Mahmud's skillful descriptive scenes allow the readers to participate in the heart of actions. There are many scenes where the political meetings are held, for instance, where Khaled finds himself in the middle of the Town Square surrounded by thousands of people and flyers strewn on the ground. Or as he was sent on an errand to buy morning soup for breakfast, and he comes across a fisherman displaying the largest fish

he has ever seen.²³⁵ The physicality of the prison is also described in detail, where he has shed light on the everyday life of the prisoners as the characters are molding.

Generally speaking, Mahmud avoids creating a one-dimensional viewpoint in his writings. Khaled is, essentially, an inexperienced young boy who has not joined the political activists for his ideals, nor does he have any ideological motivation; he becomes involved by mere chance and gradually begins to have a better understanding and a sense of justice. His hesitation and uncertainty, nevertheless, are reflected in his questioning of “those on top,” people with no names and faces but with power to whom everyone else must report.²³⁶ He constantly analyzes his newly found “comrades” despite his admiration for them. He admires Shafaq from the moment he meets him.²³⁷ His respect and admiration for Shafaq, however, is not that of a young boy of fifteen but rather one of a student who admires his mentor. Once again, this viewpoint appears rather as the authors’ viewpoint than one of the character. The narrator/character’s view is more accurate, for instance, when the young narrator meets Black-Eyed for the first time, since his immaturity is blameless and his innocent perception is expected of him.

Even the names of the political activists are very revealing. The names of the bookstore, for instance, is Mojahed, which among many definitions, could be defined as “freedom fighter.” The names of many of the young activists are Shafaq [twilight], Pendar [thought], Bidar [awake], Azad [free], and Iman [Faith], that are all symbolic

²³⁵ Mahmud, A. *The Neighbors*, 219-220.

²³⁶ Ibid, 223-224.

²³⁷ Ibid, 52.

names for these young men who speak eloquently, are kindhearted, and are almost perfect in their appearance and demeanors. Khaled too wonders about these names at first, yet he becomes more accepting as he patronizes the bookstore more often, “I am beginning to wonder about these names....”²³⁸ Not surprisingly, these are the characteristic elements of creating types used in the social realism, and Mahmud has been exceptionally kind to this group of characters in depicting them as almost perfect.

In contrast, it is the party, the organization itself, which does not pay much attention to Khaled’s lack of experience and confusion. It seems odd for the reader to observe the degree of trust that an especially eminent underground political party, Tudeh, has granted a newly arrived young boy of fifteen. There are places in the novel where the narrator reminds the reader of Khaled’s limited reading and writing ability and the fact that he has a difficult time understanding the meaning of some of the “big words” like “imperialist” and “bloodthirsty monster.”²³⁹ This reminder, of course, is a logical and believable progression, especially in sections when Khaled pretends he understands the meaning of the writings in pamphlets.²⁴⁰ In reality, this contradiction reveals the author’s own sarcasm put in the words of the character, for instance, when Khaled finds himself seeking explanation and the meaning of “those writings” from Bidar, and later, he himself trying to convey that meaning to Ebram.²⁴¹

²³⁸ Mahmud, A. *The Neighbors*, 105.

²³⁹ Ibid, 107, 109.

²⁴⁰ Ibid, 80,100,105-106.

²⁴¹ Ibid, 115-116.

Nevertheless, Khaled is not satisfied with just posing questions, and his dealing with questions reveals his lack of experience and knowledge, especially when Bidar instructs Khaled to be “careful” and keep “the information” secret.²⁴² The narrator’s now and then hesitant questions suggest that he does not simply accept what is being told and that he does not blindly follow whatever order comes “from the above”²⁴³ for he thinks and decides for himself. And if he gives in to Bidar’s unconvincing reasoning, it is rather due to his wish in getting back at Qolam Ali Khan. In other words, his motivation is rather a personal revenge than a political and universal motive to fight a tyrannical regime. Considering the character’s age and simple nature, this motivation sounds more logical and expected, rather than reflecting the author’s imposed viewpoint on him. As Jalali states, “If we could describe the complicated conditions of the 50s of Iran in the most concise and short symbolic way, it is only in noting these few short sentences of Khaled’s monologue: ‘We sit on the massive oil pipes, running along the graveyard, all the way to the harbor. It is dark. Almost midnight. Here and there, a single light flickers a faint light. The air is damp.’”²⁴⁴

Considering the rendered images, the oil pipes, the graveyard, and the dark midnight, these are all symbolic imageries used in modern Persian fiction to signify the oppressive condition and the hopelessness of many intellectuals. Despite the bleak images, there are tiny lights flickering in the distance, promising a rising sun, a glorious

²⁴² Mahmud, A. *The Neighbors*, 123.

²⁴³ Ibid, 125.

²⁴⁴ Ibid, 226.

morning, bringing hope and new possibilities. Perhaps, as the author/narrator perceives it, these symbolic imagery portray the dark decades of struggle and the hope that the intellectuals will make a difference and shed light on the gloomy political struggle against an oppressive regime.”²⁴⁵

As naïve and undeveloped Khaled’s character may appear to be in some part of the novel, still he questions the Marxist’s universal viewpoint and its applicability in a country where masses, at large, believe in religion as their only salvation. This fact alone refutes how most critics try to characterize Mahmud’s writing as “politically” and “ideologically” driven writings. This conflict surfaces particularly in parts where Khaled argues nonchalantly with his comrades, dismissing their order of not seeing Black-Eyed.²⁴⁶ When Khaled refers to a Russian novel he is reading,²⁴⁷ and all the while admires Paul,²⁴⁸ the central character, as a tough man and his will as hard as iron. In Khaled’s mind, Paul is a prodigy to be envied, a character which leaves a great impression on both Khaled and Mahmud. Jalali poses this question, “Whether or not Khaled and Baran are Paul’s twin brothers, who were born in oil-rich and scorched land of Khuzestan,” will only be determined by the author himself.²⁴⁹

On the other hand, if we consider *The Neighbors* as a documentary work on the modern history of Iran, we should also question why there is a lack of representation of

²⁴⁵ Jalali, F. *Barn bar Zamin-e Sukhteh*, 123.

²⁴⁶ Mahmud, A. *The Neighbors*, 170.

²⁴⁷ The character is perhaps a reference to “Povel,” the male character of the novel *How the iron became hard*.

²⁴⁸ Povel in Russian and Paul in English.

²⁴⁹ Jalali, F. *Baran bar Zamin-e Sukhteh*, 45.

other antigovernment political groups and organizations in the novel. Whether or not this has been an intentional act, this may confirm the critics' position regarding the author's sole political viewpoint, especially that everyone, young and old, working class and middle class portrayed in the novel, thousands of people in this small town, all wear the leftist Tudeh Party's logo on their chest, as the narrator reports.²⁵⁰

In general, in *The Neighbors*, as well as Mahmud's other novels, the characters' role is very much clear and the reader is able to follow each character's action in his or her own way of course of action. This important characteristic becomes more evident as the characters are introduced logically and with a precedent set up in such a manner that the reader soon becomes familiar with them and their actions. This framework or rule, however, does not apply to a marginal character such as Ali the Devil, the mole, who appears as an outsider but, ironically, knows the neighborhood, the people, the shopkeepers, the streets and even the back alleys very well. The existence of Ali the Devil, who pops up from nowhere, without the narrator providing the reader any details, seems rather peculiar, especially that, as the narrator reminds us, "everyone knows one another in this town."²⁵¹ In Jalali's opinion, Mahmud seems to have rushed in creating Ali the Devil and that he has not provided enough contrivance to introduce this devilish character, as he has done with other marginal characters in the story. Although many may disagree with Jalali's statement.

²⁵⁰ Mahmud, A. *The Neighbors*, 123, 153-154.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

The Neighbors is packed with many characters, which makes the novel more interesting, for Mahmud has been able to create skillfully many different types of characters and locate them in various socio-political positions without losing their string of thought or without confusing the reader. Perhaps, just like the character of Mohammad the Mechanic, Ali the Devil's role is only to appear when the author needs him and when the story necessitates his emergence.²⁵² This element is more problematic especially that the young narrator, Khaled, unfolds everything and reveals even the most secretive thoughts of the characters, yet he fails to tell the reader much about Ali the Devil. As intriguing as it may be, this surprising fact may also weaken the storyline or perhaps makes the reader question the plausibility of the character itself.

Khaled too represents "common people" at large. Although, curious, he still follows their political organizations without much consideration, especially, those individuals who would rather see their party "win" than acquire true freedom and democracy for the entire nation. He is still the same character who questions concepts and topics foreign to him, topics such as discussion of Alex Stachanove. He is curious to know who the British are and who the "exploiters and colonizers" are who have control over his country's oil. He even poses this question to Pendar and asks for explanations, but to his surprise, Pendar only responds, "These sorts of concerns have to be discussed by those on top."²⁵³ Of course, the narrator, not fully convinced, leaves the subject at that, reminding himself that Pendar knows better. The more Pendar warns him to watch

²⁵² Jalali, F. *Baran bar Zamin-e Sukhteh*, 216.

²⁵³ Mahmud, A. *The Neighbors*, p123, 234.

for Ali the Devil, especially now that he has two great weaknesses, meaning being in love with *that* girl, and being a fugitive activist, the more Khaled reevaluates his political involvement. Nevertheless, he is involved deeply now and cannot retreat, whether this is due to the “piercing look of Pendar” when he tells him, “You’re inexperienced,” or the fact that he has now experienced the injustice and the manipulation of the system on a personal level.

Khaled is too young to imagine that he may have to reveal the names of his comrades in order to protect a girl he loves. That is why he asks Pendar “What should I do?” to which Pendar replies, “You have to learn, that in the way of struggle, never allow yourself to let your emotions and feeling take over.” Plainly, he tells him to forget about Black-Eyed, for he may even hurt, unintentionally, those individuals, comrades, whom he does not know personally.²⁵⁴ Of course, Pendar’s concern is that since Khaled is naïve and inexperienced, Ali the Devil could easily take advantage of him and play him off against the faction. Khaled is too young and in love to understand what Pendar is really suggesting.

As the storyline progresses, the reader witness Khaled being arrested, carrying a suitcase full of newspapers and anti-government pamphlets. Cleverly, he manages to fool the police and run away, but now he has to go into hiding. His love for Black-Eyed drives him to sneak out of hiding one late afternoon, which results in his arrest by Ali the Devil, who traps him, ironically, in his own neighborhood right before the eyes of his

²⁵⁴ Mahmud, A. *The Neighbors*, 287.

mother and young sister.²⁵⁵ The reader, then, follows Khaled as he spends his first night in a solitary cell, and as many episodes follow in a year of fear and terror in prison. It is during these many nights of solitary confinement that Khaled revisits Pendar's voice in his mind, telling him that they are creating an environment of fear and terror.²⁵⁶ In reading these scenes, the reader cannot help but imagine the scenes of nightmares captured in the movies produced around the time that the novel was written and the effect of cinema in the novel's structure. Mahmud's novels are more like watching a movie, where vivid and detailed, cinematic scene after scene come and go, yet he has kept the intimate relationship between the author and the reader absent in the motion pictures. A fact that should also be considered is that, at the time, these types of movies and these dramatic scenes were a new phenomenon that captured the audience's attention. It is through the creation of these cinematic scenes that we could discuss Mahmud's passion and apprehension toward cinema. His interest is even more evident in his later novels like *The Scorched Land* and *The Zero Degree Latitude*, in which the reader feels as if the zoom of a camera takes her from one scene to the next. Mahmud also makes use of flashbacks and nightmares, which occur more often in the prison so that the narrator is able to step outside and revisit his past.

With Khaled now arrested and put in a confined physical space, the prison, the atmosphere of the novel changes completely. According to Jalali, one can consider *The Neighbors* as a "two-part novel," in which the first part deals with the narrator's life, his

²⁵⁵ Mahmud, A. *The Neighbors*, 293.

²⁵⁶ Ibid, 300-301.

neighbors and their mundane daily lives, their problems and concerns, which by the end of chapter three, is apparent to the reader of what has become of them or what will happen to them. In other words, no character is introduced and kept dangling in midair with no particular ending. The author, well aware of this issue, makes sure to give a beginning and an ending to each one of his creations, so the narration focuses mainly on Khaled, thus the beginning of a second part, meaning the main character's transformation. Except for some important news leaking from outside the prison, reported by a few side characters such as Leila and Bidar, up until the closing chapter of the novel, the secondary characters live their lives as they did before. At the start of the second part, however, the reader is introduced to new characters, ironically again, new neighbors with whom Khaled shares a cell, a long hallway, and the entire prison block.

The second part opens up independent from the first part with a new arrangement and new characters unrelated to the first part of the novel. One may assume that these set of characters, these cellmates are the narrator's true "neighbors" since they are much more defined and influential than the neighbors he grew up with, especially, getting to know them at a time that he begins to discover "himself" and his ideals. This independence, however, does not affect the essence and the core of the story and the author has succeeded to weave through and connect these two parts without disrupting the storyline. Nevertheless, the reader is able to read the second part of the novel without knowing much about the first part and still follow the chronological storyline. As in the first part, the narration continues by young Khaled. The only character who reappears

from the first part is Rahim the Donkey-Keeper who is imprisoned for murdering his wife, Rezvan. However, the fact that they were once neighbors does not create any ambiguity for the reader since he, like the rest of the prisoners, becomes another inmate.

Furthermore, the only connection the narrator has with the outside world is through the scattered news he receives about the former neighbors and characters such as the news of Cousin Gholam being killed, which has only one purpose, to dramatize the story, but the killing of the character itself does not add any dimension to the novel. There is also a visit arranged by the help of Aman Aqa for Khaled to visit his mother and Bolur Khanom, going to a restaurant for one afternoon of freedom. In addition, Leila, the daring daughter of Mullah Ahmad, brings Khaled bits and pieces of news as she manages to come and visit the narrator. Bidar too appears briefly and cleverly gives Khaled a written code of a secret contact to keep him in touch with the outside world.

Mahmud has made use of this technique by creating repeated scenes such as the coming and going of Ali the Devil, his constant torture and interrogations by notorious Shahri whose whip can bring prisoners to their knees. The only setback, of course, is Khaled's age, who is about seventeen years old and condemned to a three-year sentence among much older murderers and thieves, rather than being among juveniles, a major issue, according to many critics, Mahmud either intentionally has dismissed or did not consider it to be a problem. It is also strange to find Khaled, who has been arrested for his political activities, among ordinary prisoners rather than among the political prisoners. This detail too may cause the reader to question the author's motive.

Contrary to what most critics have represented Khaled as a “dedicated political activist,” the final scene suggests that he has neither ideologically nor intellectually arrived at this point by an educated choice; he often portrays his lack of understanding or his full agreement with the party’s purpose of struggle, even though he cooperates with the orders. This lends itself to the fact that what Mahmud strives to depict is not to make a hero out of an ordinary person overnight, but rather to depict a fearless young boy, who could easily fall into the traps of the political parties. His aim is rather to depict a young boy who is curious enough to want to know about his environment, who is in search of answers, who wants changes and seeks justice, who wants to have a voice, perhaps to be an active member of his society, but the only way to do so is by joining the political parties. The political struggle is not what Khaled really sees as an answer or a solution, but he has simply no other choice to voice his opinion in an oppressed regime.

The Tale of a City

The Tale of a City is the second longest of Mahmud’s work. Though an independent work, it could be read as part of the trilogy of novels, since it follows the story of the protagonist, Khaled of *The Neighbors*. The story, however, differs in that the character is an officer, now demoted due to the political activities he was engaged in against the government, although Khaled, the narrator, tends to be older, perhaps in his early twenties. In this story, creating types is still one of Mahmud’s efficient techniques. What sets this novel apart from *The Neighbors* is that the character types created here are

not made to divide the characters into binary opposition forces of “good” and “evil.” Nevertheless, once again, Mahmud introduces to his readers many distinctive characters who shape the storyline. Yet, in terms of development of style of writing and artistic techniques and innovations, one can argue that Mahmud’s competence and dexterity has gone far beyond his previous works. This work employs a much more sophisticated language, both in scope and by means of the local and regional dialects of a much broader area of southern Iran, in particular the cities located in the Persian Gulf. His prior style of writing, mainly, the use of short sentences and the absence of sentences with omitted verbs, which were evident in the former works, and even in *The Neighbors*, now is replaced with fully developed and lucid sentences. This language, coupled with the local dialects and regional color, has created a very realistic work and believable characters, who represent the south and the small, remote area of this part of the country with its mixture of many people from all backgrounds.

At first glance, Mahmud’s style of writing may appear as simple and unassuming, but the reader soon discerns the skill and capability of the author behind its simple prose, especially in the dialogs, as in the case of Ali’s recalling and retelling the story of his eight-year-old friend, Ahmad Ali, whose sister, Alieh, has run away. In a roundabout way, Ali tells his own story to the narrator and the narrator let us hear Ali’s story in his own voice. Just like Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*, where Hemingway has used a straightforward prose, yet powerful, effective, and moving. To many critics, writing in simple prose is the most difficult form of writing. Although form and style of

writing are very important, the story should not be sacrificed for the sake of form and style, inundating the readers. As Faulkner, the master of form says, “Those whose main concern is to create form in their writing, should go and become a mason.” Additionally, Jean Cocteau, the French novelist, says, “Literature is not a complex form to say the simple things, but rather a simple form to say the complex things.”²⁵⁷

The most disturbing factor that makes the reader wonder is the fact that the narrator of *The Tale of a City* seems not to notice what is troubling the other main character of the story, Ali, and does not even show any interest or curiosity to find out why. Only later, a good quarter into the novel, the reader begins to follow the clues and can guess that Ali and this newcomer stranger, Sharifeh, could be related, yet the narrator pretends or chooses to ignore this obvious detail. The scene that deals with the death of Sharifeh²⁵⁸ is one of the most poignant and unforgettable scenes in the story, a vivid, dramatic, and colorful scene, especially with the stormy sea across the horizon. That being said, if the author were to accept this reality that the narrator should not have to pretend about what is troubling Ali, the story, therefore, could come to an end much earlier, consequently, many scenes had to be eliminated.

Although, there are clues given throughout the story that suggest Sharifeh was murdered, the reader is left to decide for herself whether or not she is killed or committed suicide, since the narrator fails to provide clear details. It is a puzzle that will not be unraveled and ends in an open-end conclusion, in which the reader is invited to contribute

²⁵⁷ Jalali, F. *Baran bar Zamin-e Sukhteh*, 195-196.

²⁵⁸ Mahmud, A. *The Tale of a City*, 261-262.

with her own imagination and to decide how to put the puzzle pieces together and to write the ending. A technique cleverly used to allow the reader to imagine the ending as she wishes, so that two readers may arrive at a completely different conclusion, a technique Mahmud also uses in the story "The Return." The same is also true in the case of Ali's sudden death he dies. He dies, apparently, in the struggle with the professional smugglers. His death intensifies Khaled's loneliness who tries to forget his pain by the consumption of alcohol and opium. His mind remains preoccupied by the death of Sharifeh and Ali. There is a scene where Khaled finds a locket pendant, which Sharifeh used to wear and never let him touch, among Ali's found belongings in his sack. As he opens this locket, Khaled is shocked to see a picture of Ali, about eight years old, standing next to his father and his sister. This scene allows the reader to make a quick connection by remembering Ali's retelling the story of a childhood friend whose sister had ran away at the age of fifteen. Her action, causing her family shame, had driven her father to go look for her and her lover, and to kill them both in an act of honor killing.²⁵⁹ This is a theme that was also depicted in *The Neighbors*, committed by Naser Abadi who too decides to kill his sister who has taken a lover and ran away with him. Ali's death is not only a mysterious death, it is a question of self-examination; his internal struggle, his constant agitation, his troubled conscious of committing murder, which has led him to get himself killed deliberately, is a mere attempt to free himself from a troubled conscious.

²⁵⁹ Mahmud, A. *The Tale of a City*, 78, 134, 163.

As the pieces of the puzzle come together, the reader is finally able to know all this in the final pages, where the story comes to a tragic end.

Although *The Tale of a City* could be read as a sequel to *The Neighbors*, there is a gap in time. The present time is a few years after the *coup de 'tat* of 1953, an era of constant arrest and the executions of many low-to-high rank officers, who allegedly had ties with the Tudeh Communist Party. Unlike the curious and ever-present protagonist of *The Neighbors*, the main character of *The Tale of a City* plays rather a passive and flaccid role, and the story mainly advances by the active roles of secondary characters. Once again, the protagonist reports on his enduring months of imprisonment at a temporary detention center, where he witnessed the torture of high-ranking members of his party as well as the execution of the initial group of detainees. Eventually, without having a proper and legal trial, the narrator is sentenced to three years of exile in Bandar Lengeh, an isolated, sleepy harbor in the heart of the Persian Gulf. Once all his comrades are transferred to various places, the narrator finds himself befriended by an ordinary soldier, Ali, referred to in the novel as “A young dark-complexion and kindhearted man,” who at times is given the equal weight as a narrator. In reality, this novel employs multiple narrators, as if the role of narrator has been deliberately divided between several characters. Although, there is the existence of a central narrator, the reader has to rely on the report by other characters to follow the storyline.

The narrator, thus, spends his days in solitude and isolation among godforsaken residents of a town, once a thriving and lively harbor city. He spends his days sleeping

and his nights drinking at the local teahouse/tavern, and sometimes even smokes opium, to offset the boredom imposed on him and to forget the brutal destiny fallen on his comrades and his country. While he broods over the past memories, remembering the torture scenes of his comrades, and the collapse of his ideals, he travels back and forth in time.

In this novel, the characters appear much more different from each other and their actions, their way of speaking, their distinct manners, and their mindset reflected in their monologues, all reveal themselves to the reader. Another important aspect that Mahmud pays close attention to is the condition of each character, which is rather more external than internal. The color of skin, the sound of the voice, the accent, the type of clothes they wear, or in the way they carry themselves and interact with the world around them, are all captured, in particular, in this novel. Often times, Mahmud creates the protagonist of his novels as a very distinct character, as in the case of Khaled, Goshtasb, Nozar Esfandiari, and Baran. The secondary characters, unlike in *The Neighbors*, are not black and white, good or evil, beautiful or ugly. They are much more real and believable, a fact that suggests Mahmud's stepping away from that binary oppositions depicted in the social realism in his later novels.

The events take place in four various phases, ending in an open-end conclusion. It is a writer-reader relationship, where the reader's participation is necessary to assemble the missing pieces of the puzzle, with clues provided by the author here and there. The scope is much more cinematic than the one in *The Neighbors*, and at times it appears as if

the camera simply moves from one scene to the next, urging the reader to follow. In the first phase, which could be called “the surface layer,” from the very beginning, the reader is up against the highest point of the story, right after the burial of Ali the Soldier. At the end of the story, the reader makes a circular journey and arrives at the beginning to discover Ali’s secret, his relationship to Sharifeh, his past, the story of his family, and the cause of his death. In contrast, the second phrase, deals with Khaled’s life and the accounts of his political activities, his imprisonment, his exile, captured mainly through the flashbacks and relying on memory, as it is the main plotline of the story. The third phase sheds light on the town itself, its local geography, its local dialect, the south, present as always as the backdrop of the story, and the various characters, who not only shape the story, but also are the creators of *The Tale of a City*.

The fourth phase, which could be identified as an underlying sub-layer, deals with the language itself, which becomes more of a reporter language than a narrative language of a novel, especially in Khaled’s recounting of his early days kept at the detention center, where he witnesses the resistance of the high-ranking officers under torture, and the executions of many of the Party’s members. The final chapter mainly consists of these scenes, at times using techniques such as flashback and stream of consciousness, at other times, abandoning these methods entirely, making the chapters read as independent chapters unrelated to the early plotline. One major weakness of *The Tale of a City*, therefore, is the inclusion of these long passages, for Mahmud could have employed a different technique to reveal this important part of the story. Critics such as Jalali

believes that narrating this segment of the story in its entirety, from chapter seven to nine, by use of only repeated flashbacks, limits the immediateness of the main plot, even though at times it may help the reader to discover what has happened before, and what is the reason for Khaled's exile.

The local and geographical conditions of Bandar Lengeh, dominant in everyday lives of this small circle of residents, local people as well as those officials and soldiers, who try to endure this slow and lethargic pace of life by consumption of alcohol and opium in the rundown teahouse/tavern, are all effectively rendered. The reader not only reads about this constant lethargic feeling, but also feels and suffers the slow pace of the daily life of the characters as they struggle to pass their time. Mahmud thus succeeds transmitting this relentless feeling of malaise and sense of loss, especially with regard to the narrator himself. Alas, the final chapters seem to drag on, taking away the immediateness of the story, in particular, in the narrator's repeated coming and going to the teahouse, which becomes redundant and unnecessary even though one may do so in real life.

The description of the local landscape and the depiction of the various dialects are important aspects which makes *The Tale of a City* stands out in comparison to Mahmud's other novels. Paying detailed attention to the landscape of this isolated port city, the Persian Gulf, the sounds, the color of the sky, the earth, the heat, the open horizon, the simple fishermen, the various accents and dialects of the southern people rendered throughout the novel, as far as Bushehr, Shiraz and Jahrom, all add to the beauty of the

language of the novel. Nature itself depicted as if another dynamic sideline character, another narrator who accompany the reader throughout the story, urging the reader to connect with this sultry landscape. When it comes to nature, Mahmud is a true painter, his brush is his pen and his canvas is his novels. He is incredibly connected to the landscape of the southern part of Iran and has a gift to depict the beauty of this landscape for his audience. At times, the tiniest of details cannot be hidden from his detail-oriented eyes, from the doves flying around each other in circle in a patchy sky and to the movement of tiny worms under the moist earth.

Mahmud's descriptive style of writing becomes even more evident in his creation and portrayal of various characters. Mahmud is particularly meticulous to fully develop his main characters and central places. As a result, Bandar Lengeh and its inhabitants, the rendered details of their physical features, the way they speak and act, their idioms and dialects, like real people who act on stage, come to life vividly and draw the reader deep into the heart of the story.

In the third phase of the story, for instance, the same detailed imagery, very much real and gruesome, is reflected in the description of the prison and the prisoners themselves, in the details of their torture and the brutal treatment by the torturers. These detailed descriptions may suggest the author's intention of seeking justice for he diligently spends time, creating several chapters, specifically for this purpose. Nevertheless, the narrator/author's passion in rendering these scenes is still very realistic because Mahmud does not stop short here to talk about the betrayal, in particular Bidar's

betrayal, one of the key political activists portrayed in *The Neighbors*, a man who the narrator admired so as a young boy. Interestingly, these were characters who were located in the binary opposition before and depicted as “good” versus “evil,” a necessary component used in the social realism and traditional style of writing that Mahmud has, largely, abandoned in *The Tale of a City*. Here, the good characters too are capable of growing weak and no longer able to stand for their ideals, as most likely it occurs in real life.

Unlike in *The Neighbors*, in *The Tale of a City* not all the “evil” characters look distorted and ugly because they represent the wrong side. There are prison guards, for instance, who are charming and express their sympathy towards the prisoners. The narrator also sheds light on the surrender of Ehsan, a team member, who has revealed the location of the party’s printing house under torture. The narrator is not quick to judge the character but blames the organization for not being quick to find a different location for their printing machines. “One month,” says Ehsan, “one month of torture. And they knew. They could move mountains, if they [party] wanted to.”²⁶⁰ Mahmud reflects the impact of the organization’s lack of crucial and timely action on the narrator and how dishearten and disillusioned he has grown as the result. The narrator may be still irritated, hopeless, and outraged, but he is also forgiving for he still understands that people are human beings after all and he can still find humanity in everyone, even in the traitors.

²⁶⁰ Mahmud, A. *The Tale of a City*, 326.

In contrast to the violence of the prison and the struggle between the prisoners and the prison guards, in the chapters of dealing with the days of exile depicted in Bandar Lengeh, there is no sign of resistance by any of the characters and the dominant mood is rather the sense of hopelessness, indifference, boredom, and isolation. The men of the Harbor, whether locals or the officials, regardless of their now and then portrayal of animosity, live among each other in relative harmony. Every so often, quarrels break out between a few members of the Shiite and Sunnis sects, which usually come to an end in an amusing manner. There are also the accounts of romantic relationships between older men and younger men, which are usually depicted as witty scenes. Another theme that is depicted, nevertheless, in passing, is the conflicting dispute between the Sunni and Shi'a believers as it is captured in the ongoing hostility between Shater Qolam and Mohammad Nour.²⁶¹

Like most of Mahmud's novels, *The Tale of a City*, can be categorized as an "autobiographical novel." The second part of the novel, specifically, reflects the author's real life and his imprisonment, witnessing the torture and executions of the leaders of the Freedom Front.²⁶² These memories are often recounted in the narrator's monologues and his recalling of the past. Some critics such as Jalali commented that this novel would

²⁶¹ Mahmud, A. *The Tale of a City*, 13, 136.

²⁶² The Freedom Movement of Iran (FMI, also Liberation Movement of known in Persian as Nehzat-e Azadi-e Iran, is an Iranian political organization which was founded in 1961 by Mehdi Bazargan, Mahmoud Taleghani, Yadollah Sahabi, Mostafa Chamran, Ali Shariati, Sadegh Ghotbzadeh and some other political or religious figures. Despite being outlawed by the prevailing regime in Iran, the group continues to exist. The group's current leader is Ebrahim Yazdi since 1995. FMI is one of the major parties in The Alliance of Nationalist-Religious Activists of Iran ("Etelaf-e Nirouhaye Melli Mazhabi-e Iran"). Musa al-Sadr was also believed to be a close associate of the movement and of its founding members.

have been an extraordinary work of fiction if most of the final scenes were captured in a separate story on their own.²⁶³

The Scorched Land

The Scorched Land is Mahmud's third novel and it is considered one of the first Iranian novels that capture the beginning days of the Iran-Iraq war in the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The tone and the overarching atmosphere rendered in the novel is very much similar to most of Mahmud's novels, in which his sentiment toward his native land and, particularly, the southern people, is genuinely depicted.

An important aspect of this novel is the absence of the direct and physical enemy. Although the reader hears names and phrases such as "Saddam," "Basra," "Iraqi soldiers," "Iraqi bombs and tanks," none of the scenes deals directly with the frontline and the combat zone rather the reader witnesses the effect and the catastrophic outcomes of the war, especially imposed on the working class. Mahmud's intention, therefore, is not to take his reader to the frontline where the soldiers fight, but rather to shed light on ordinary people whose lives are brutally interrupted by an unexpected war. He captures successfully people's fears, their desperate attempt to find shelter as the bombs destroy their houses, as their children die before their eyes, as food and life necessities become scarce and hopelessness and uncertainty fill their heart. The reader witnesses the devastating effect as ordinary people are forced to leave their homes and the dead bodies

²⁶³ Jalali, F. *Baran bar Zamin-e Sukhteh*, 196.

of innocent people, arms and legs cut off, are being dragged out from under the rubble. What is important is that the author makes a point in telling the reader that not everyone wanted to be a martyr, or to be involved in an unwanted war.

Although the story is told in first-person, the narrator only acts as a reporter, taking the reader from one house to the next, from this alley to the next street, following the people's fate and struggle in times of war. As always, Mahmud is behind his camera and this time he zooms in on his beautiful Ahvaz city, urging the reader, once again, to follow him. The background, as in most of Mahmud's novels, is the south of Iran. The summer is about to end, and the narrator is waking up to the sound of the tanks rolling in and bombs dropping on people's houses. There have been rumors about the possibility of armed aggression by this bordering neighbor, Iraq. Everywhere the narrator goes, the people he comes in contact with, the local news channel broadcasted from Basra TV channel, all forecast the likelihood of a war. The news exacerbates as the local Basij²⁶⁴ young men are being captured by the Iraqi soldiers and shown on Basra TV. The signs are everywhere and the rumors are loud and clear, everywhere, except on the local and national Iranian TV that goes on with the regular programming as usual. The rumors become a reality as the Iraqi tanks are reaching the border cities such as Susangard. As the bombing intensifies, the narrator and his large family of brothers and sisters seek refuge in underground shelters.

²⁶⁴ The Basij is a military branch of The Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution known as Sepāh-e Pāsdārān-e Enqelāb-e Eslāmi, or Sepāh for short in Iran and is often called "Revolutionary Guards." It was founded after the Islamic Revolution and their original mission was to defend Iran's borders and maintain internal order, and to protect the country's Islamic system.

Once again, in *The Scorched Land* there is the presence of a character named “Khaled,” except that he is the narrator’s brother, a thirty-five year old man who is constantly in fear of losing his job. The given clues here and there suggest that this character is none other than Mahmud’s ever present protagonist, Khaled, and this is the story of the continuation of Khaled’s life, this time, however, as a mature family man, whose concern is to provide for his family and keep them safe. In addition, there are recurring characters from the previous novels, in particular, from *The Neighbors*, characters such as Mohammad the Mechanic, Rostam Effendi, Mehdi the Barefoot, and even Napoleon, and Mohammad Salmani, the local barber and a few others who surface as the looters in this story.

With train tickets being scarce, people everywhere are desperate to leave town and to seek refuge in the neighboring cities or even in far-off places. The Abadan oil refinery²⁶⁵ has been bombed severely and most southern border cities, such as Dezful and Khorramshahr, have been viciously bombarded by the Iraqi missiles. In retaliation, people begin to capture a group of Iraqi soldiers and walk them through the town square. In *The Scorched Land*, the reader can trace, once again, Mahmud’s real life and his experience of a catastrophic war and even the loss of his own brother.²⁶⁶

Even before the war breaks out, the narrator signals its danger and its chance of occurrence as the people go about their daily lives. He captures this terror in the

²⁶⁵ The Abadan refinery or as it is known in Iran, Pālāyeshgāh-e Ābādān, is located in Abadan near the coast of the Persian Gulf. It was completed in 1912 and is considered one of world's largest oil refineries. It was largely destroyed in September 1980 by Iraqi military forces during the initial stages of the Iraqi invasion of Iran.

²⁶⁶ Mahmud lost one of his brothers in the Iran/Iraq war in 1981.

contrasting images of the Karun River flowing restlessly as children run around to buy ice cream, and as the neighborhood's boys play soccer cheerfully. The narrator simply provides these contrasting emotions and allows the reader to be as present as possible so to feel the unrest and calm at the same time.

The Scorched Land offers the reader a humanitarian viewpoint, capturing many people from all walks of life who represent various social classes of a society which Mahmud was very familiar with. From the poor, working class, to the white-collar employees and businesspersons, from the opportunist thieves who loot people's belonging while they struggle to seek refuge in the bomb shelters or in the neighboring cities, each one of these individuals and various social classes reveal their own traits in the most troublesome time of the war.

The Zero Degree Latitude

The Zero Degree Latitude is the fourth and the most voluminous novel written by Mahmud. Unlike many of Mahmud's novels, the story of *The Zero Degree Latitude* is told in third person, a style of narration rather unusual for Mahmud who insists on writing very cinematic and descriptive first-person viewpoint. Nevertheless, the point of view still shifts from one character's point of view to the next, leading the readers through snapshots of various scenes. Despite the simple and linear language used by the common people in everyday life, the tone of the novel, at times, tend to shift to a great degree toward a mechanical and journalistic language. If it were not for characters such as

Nozar and Belqeis, whose witty demeanors come to rescue the story as needed, this would have been an uninspired, lengthy novel where Mahmud perhaps may have lost his readership in the middle of the story. This fact, by no means, should undermine the skillfulness of Mahmud and the power of the regional language he has captured throughout the novel. As in his preceding novels, here once again, Mahmud succeeds in capturing the native southern dialect and allows his readers to hear this melodic tone in the voice of many of the characters who represent the southern people. Writing in regional dialect not only makes the story richer but also displays the skillfulness of the writer himself and makes the story unfold vividly before the eyes of an audience not familiar with this part of the world.

In general, the readers of Mahmud's stories are able to make a great emotional connection with many of the characters, yet this connection, unfortunately, is not explicitly established in *The Zero Degree Latitude*. Perhaps this is mainly the author's intention to depict an inconsistent relationship with his reader so to reflect the theme of the novel. Of course, there are other extensive novels in modern Iranian fiction such as *Kelida* and *Ahu Khanom's Husband*. Even if one were to compare *The Zero Degree Latitude* with *Kelidar*, the reader is more connected emotionally, even, with less important characters. Compared even to *Ahu Khanom's Husband*, where the story is more frivolous, the reader still can make a better emotional connection with its characters. Many critics suggest that Mahmud should have written this novel in a much shorter version, yet more effectively, avoiding redundancy and capturing the same scene

over and over. In fact, this is an ongoing critique by many critics with regard to Mahmud's most novels, to avoid creating repeated scenes that not only do not add anything valuable to the novel but also harm its language and its vividness and make a brilliant novel less impressive of a work.

Taken as a whole, the characters appear to not have vividly rendered in *The Zero Degree Latitude* and the reader does not have a clear picture of their physical features, especially for such a long novel that necessitates the establishing of an intimate relationship between the reader and the characters. The absence of emotion, particularly, surfaces when an important leading character dies, and the reader is told about his death but does not witness the scene on her own so as to connect directly with this reality. The narrator decides instead to do the job of experiencing this painful incident for the reader by simply delivering the news. As an example, we could mention Baran (another protagonist that the reader follows page by page), who suddenly gets arrested and the reader is informed, much later, in a dialog by another character, Nozar, who reveals his own difficult experience of going to the prison to see Baran.

Perhaps scenes such as the one mentioned above, could have been easily revealed to the reader by allowing her to experience it firsthand, rather than being told. Of course, readers, who follow Mahmud's stories are well aware of the author's intention. They know that Mahmud has no intention of repeating the scenes of the prison since he has done this in *The Neighbors*, and later in *The Tale of a City*. It is as if Mahmud has an agreement with his readers, to refer them to his former stories. Jalali argues, however,

that for the work of art to be able to stand alone, and for a novel to be evaluated independently, the reader should not be obliged to have followed prior novels to find out about a particular scene.²⁶⁷

The Living Human

Although this novel has been introduced as a work of translation, it was in fact written by Mahmud himself. In the introduction, Mahmud questions its authorship, and he insists that he had translated it from the Arabic and that the author is an unknown Iraqi writer whom Mahmud has never met but only got to know through an interview with the author's daughter, Brigit. The novel, however, refers to Mahmud's various novels and its setting, which is also the south, the existence of the traditional coffee houses or teahouses found in many cities throughout Iran, and the repeated themes of smoking opium and the constant search for solitude and isolation. In the final chapter, the author takes the reader directly to the final chapter of *The Fig Tree of Temples*.

The Fig Tree of the Temples

The Fig Tree of the Temples sets itself apart from Mahmud's other novels not only in its tone and background, but also in the style of writing, in that Mahmud distances himself from his usual realist writing and enters another domain of school of thought which is essentially both realism and surrealism. This novel also may be the only novel

²⁶⁷ Jalali, F. *Barn bar Zamin-e Sukhteh*, 235.

that is not set in Mahmud's familiar native Khuzestan, but rather against the backdrop of Tehran in post-revolutionary Iran, although not explicitly stated. The opening scene divulges the monologue of one of the main characters, this time a female character, Ammeh Taji, whose only wish is to be able to someday watch the tall trees of the backyard being entirely uprooted, to watch all the flowers in the garden wilt away, to watch the house in complete ruin, and to watch simply a slow and utter demolition of a once magnificent house. This opening scene not only sets an ominous mood but also suggests that the reader should expect a disappointing, doomed destiny, especially those readers who have followed Mahmud up to this point.

As always, Mahmud obliged himself to shed light on the reality and complexity of the internal conflict and to unfold this conflict before the eyes of his reader, one layer at a time, a pattern seen in many of his novels. The surreal part, however, is the existence of similes and symbols such as the "fig tree" and the "house" itself, a fact that suggests Mahmud's inclination toward "magic realism" where the superstitious belief is the overpowering element as the background story. This sudden change of style may suggest Mahmud's attempt to write a novel filled with puzzles and mysterious scenes, so as to explore various ideas and styles of writing as if he wishes to offer his reader a fresh point of view, a different taste of his novels.

As the only remaining member of the Esfandiar family in Iran, Faramarz Azarpad, an opium addict, is released from prison as he was convicted for selling opium. He is very much like the main character of *The Zero Degree Latitude*, Nozar Esfandiari, and

also his attitude resembles the opium addict Hajj Tofiq of *The Neighbors* who always squeezes money out of his wife, Afaq. The interesting part of this novel is that as soon as Faramarz is released from the prison and searches to find opium to smoke, the style of writing shifts to Mahmud's familiar style, and scenes quickly resemble to the scenes of the previous novels, in particular the scenes where the characters such as Hajj Tofiq and Khorshidkollah's Man smoke opium. This fact lead the reader to believe that the characters are depicted as extremely transparent and that they repeat the same trivial actions and perform their dull habits, a fact that Mahmud insists on repeating in his various novels.

From an early point in the story, the reader immediately finds out that the key characters such as Esfandiar and Afsaneh are both dead, Farzaneh has committed suicide, and Faramarz is in jail and Ammeh Taji lives alone in the house. The reader is also provided that Mehran Shahraki, a man who Afsaneh has married to after Esfandiar's death, has finally managed to have gained some capital, open a small office, and is now trying to build residential complexes around Ammeh Taji's property so he can sell them and make a quick profit. And of course, the important aspect of the house is the existence of the "fig tree" as a "sacred living object," which attracts many villagers who come to perform their routine pilgrimage with the hope that their wishes come true, their sick will be cured, and their sufferings will cease. Despite their transparency and predictability, these characters are still believable and even memorable and, as a whole, readers could relate to them, sympathize with them, and find many like them in real life.

Moreover, none of them are flawless and regardless of their malice and limitations, they are not one-dimensional characters like those in *The Neighbors*, which are depicted either as “good” or “evil” and nothing in between.

In search of a fresh start and making a new life, Faramarz disappears from the novel only to reappear as Dr. Azarshenas who recently has set up an office, visiting patients, and has even hired a new secretary, Zari, who happened to be the sister of Fazel, another secondary character. Mahmud’s focus, once again, is on the unfortunate and unsuccessful people, who face a doomed destiny and cannot do anything except accept their fate. Even though the reader is able to find humor in some of the scenes, they are still tinted with a bitter and depressing tone, void of any hope.

Now that Mahmud breaks away from his usual realist style of writing and tests the boundaries of magic realism, he does not seem to have gained the same success in creating a novel in which he has tried to experiment with an innovative style of writing. He is much more successful when he is faithful to his own style of realism as he is not an experimental writer but a writer who writes from his experiences. When it comes to writing, there is essentially little to do with the author’s imagination, but rather the fact that Mahmud has experienced his stories and, precisely, that is what makes his works so unforgettable. Like great writers of his time, Dowlatabadi and Al-e Ahmad, Mahmud has no interest in the unreal or surreal world. He is, therefore, at his best when he writes from experience rather than imagination. He does not belong to the group of writers who predominantly write from imagination, writers like Hedayat, Chubak, Bahram Sadeghi,

and Golestan, for their imagination is the key and their works are at their best when they explore the unreal, dreamlike world. When Mahmud tries to write like these writers, as he has attempted to write *The Living Human Being* or *The Fig Tree of Temples*, he fails to be truthful to his own style of writing, thus he fails to achieve the same degree of success. The characters of Mahmud's stories come across as believable and real, because he knows them well, he has experienced them, and that is why they are memorable and everlasting.

Going back to the core object of the novel, mainly the fig tree, it represents four generations, and the reader is able to guess this by the age of the caretaker and his ancestors. This parable could be translated as the four decades or periods following the decades of the constitutional revolution, and later 1953 *coup d'e'tat*, perhaps, the age of a nation at the verge of falling to pieces. Additionally, the age of the fig tree could also suggest the decades after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, during which all that courage and hope were simply replaced with disillusionment, hopelessness, and continued disappointments, and when the intellectuals had to abandon their ideals. Ironically, the main character, Faramarz, too dies in his sad loneliness and his addiction to opium.

Another symbol is "the stone display" or "*Loh-e Sang*," which is a physical object from the past, but now, a new name, Mehran, is carved on it instead. The simple people who come as pilgrims and circumvent the tree represent the ordinary people, perhaps the Iranian masses, who blindly follow this new leader, in other words Ayatollah Khomeini. The use of metaphor is vividly rendered here, representing a passive people whose

slogans and strange language and chants, customs and beliefs are incomprehensible as if they, themselves, have no idea what the purpose of their pilgrimage to the fig tree is.

Unlike his other novels where Mahmud is quick to express his sympathy for the people of all classes, especially the working class, here his lack of sympathy and ridicule for the ignorant and simple-minded people is very much felt. In particular, in the final chapter where the fig tree continues to grow to the extent that its roots are spreading out everywhere, blocking all the doors of schools and the doors of the movie theaters, the naive people continue to give their hard-earned money to the “caretaker,” who brazenly collects it. Reading between the lines and keeping these symbols in mind, remind the reader the closing down of the universities shortly after the 1979 Islamic Revolution as it was called “Cultural Revolution.”²⁶⁸ Ironically, Mahmud has chosen not to mention the word “universities,” but rather take it all the way back to the fourth grade school children. And these are not the only public domains that are affected by this giant fig tree. Also, the production companies, the medical organizations, the clinics, are all shut down due to the radical growth of the fig tree. A tree which is no longer just a tree but rather a miraculous tree that has turned into a person, a character, a very powerful and a destructive person with many legs, hands, limbs, body, head, and a mind of its own. A tree that its function is not to benefit the human being, spread shades, give fruit, and produce oxygen, but to suffocate, to close all the ways of improvement and development

²⁶⁸ The Cultural Revolution (1980–1987) known as *Enghelab-e Farhangi* in Iran, was a period following the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran where the academia of Iran was purged of Western and non-Islamic influences to bring it in line with Shi’a Islam. During this period, initially, the universities were closed for three years (1980–1983) and after reopening, many books were banned and thousands of students and lecturers were purged from the schools.

of the human beings in the name of “holiness,” in the name of “spirituality” and “mantra.” The tree may cure a blind person or two or listen to the prayers of an old woman, but it closes all the ways towards progress. It destroys books and closes libraries’ doors. This tree acquires its power from all the elements of energy, earth, sun, wind, and air and it offers its power to the “Green-Eyed Man” who is the villain of the story. In fact, as the story draws to an end, the reader finds herself more perplexed, asking perhaps what does this tree symbolize with its negative power? Why has all this supernatural power been bestowed upon this tree to only destroy and to impede human progress? Why this demonic power? Why the gatherings of so many simpleminded people around it? And the novel ends in a complete disarray, where the elementary school children are gathered in front of a closed library, looking rather confused. Corpse after corpse falls to the ground on the streets. Omid’s bookstore is on fire. Women are squeezed next to each other, and men are pushed back. One by one, high schools, bookstores, and clinics set on fire, gulping the entire city in a blazing fire. A coffin filled with spears, swords, blades flash over people’s heads, and the “Green-Eyed Man,” leaning against his cane, looks at the crowd and the fire that is engulfing everything. As he gazes, two green lenses fall into his hands, and the reader realizes that he is none other than Faramarz. This sudden realization leaves the reader completely mystified, pondering what just happened and how all that power dissipated so unexpectedly. The fact of the matter is that we may come to such illogical ending in stories shaped by magic realism and surrealism in which the skillful writers such as

Marquez or Toni Morison set the mood and are able to convince the readers of such unexpected ending. Or we can find them in novels such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*,²⁶⁹ where the foundation of the story already has been laid out for the reader throughout, allowing the reader to gain the necessary trust to believe such an abrupt ending. This sense of trust, however, is absent from *The Fig Tree of Temples* and the story is told rather in an unbelievable manner. Thus, the story fails to deliver its core hidden message and one could assert that, unfortunately, Mahmud has experimented with a field unknown to him. Nevertheless, this novel is an accurate representation of the events, both internally and externally, that occurred around the time that Mahmud wrote the novel.

²⁶⁹ Uncle Tom's Cabin was the most-filmed story of the silent film era with at least nine known adaptations between 1903 – 1927. This popularity was due to the continuing popularity of both the book and "Tom shows," meaning audiences were already familiar with the characters and the plot, making it easier for the film to be understood without spoken words.

Chapter Five

Ahmad Mahmud and Socialist Realism

As many critics have asserted, one can categorize Mahmud's works as socio-realistic novels. As Hushang states, the style of writing and the setting of Ahmad Mahmud's novels and his dealing with historical figures and people throughout his novels make the reader view his novels as socio-political novels.²⁷⁰ Social realism, as broadly understood, originally developed in the former Soviet Union, and it refers to as a style of realistic art that became a dominant style in many socialist countries in the 19th century.²⁷¹ In other words, social realism is a broader type of art that realistically depicts subjects of social concern, the struggle of the masses, in particular the working class or proletariat. As it is widely understood, after the Russian Revolution, socialist realism became an international literary movement. As a result, socialist trends in literature were established first in the 1920s in Germany, France, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. Among many writers who helped develop socialist realism in the West were pioneer writers such as Louis Aragon, Johannes Becher, and Pablo Neruda.²⁷²

²⁷⁰ Aqa'i, A. *Bidardelan dar Ayeneh*, 41

²⁷¹ wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_socialism

²⁷² Ibid.

This form of literary movement had its roots in neoclassicism²⁷³ and the traditions of realism in Russian literature of the 19th century that described the life of simple people and it was typified by the aesthetic philosophy of Maxim Gorky.²⁷⁴ Its purpose, essentially, was to elevate the common workers, whether factory or agricultural workers, by presenting their lives and works as admirable. In other words, its goal was to educate the people about the Communism and its functionality. The ultimate aim was to create what Lenin called “an entirely new type of human being.”²⁷⁵ Industrial and agricultural landscapes thus became popular subjects, glorifying the achievements of the Soviet economy during this period. In addition, novelists were expected to produce uplifting stories that depicted real life and the struggles of the proletariat in a manner consistent with the Marxist doctrine of dialectical materialism.²⁷⁶ What is more, Socialist realism, therefore, called for “loyalty to the political party doctrine, a fact that has often been criticized as detrimental to the creation of true art.”²⁷⁷ Other critics have also described the products of socialist realism as “inferior,” since its limited view of reality does not permit the artist to create aesthetic art. Furthermore, the Hungarian Marxist essayist

²⁷³Neoclassicism is the name given to Western movements in the decorative and visual arts, literature, theatre, music, and architecture that draw inspiration from the "classical" art and culture of Ancient Greece or Ancient Rome. The main Neoclassical movement coincided with the 18th century Age of Enlightenment, and continued into the early 19th century, latterly competing with Romanticism. wikipedia.org/wiki/Neoclassicism.

²⁷⁴ (1868 – 1936), primarily known as Maxim (Maksim) Gorky (Russian: Макси́м Го́рький), was a Russian and Soviet writer, a founder of the Socialist Realism literary method and a political activist.

²⁷⁵ wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_socialism

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

Georg Lukács criticized the rigidity of socialist realism, proposing his own “critical realism” as an alternative.²⁷⁸

For the purpose of categorizing Mahmud’s works as “social realist” we will analyze the characteristics of his works. Whether Mahmud was aware of this literary movement and whether he deliberately chose to construct his novels according to this doctrine, is rather irrelevant in analyzing his works. What is important is to consider how his literary production has formed and the kind of contribution Mahmud’s work offered to the formation of this literary movement in Iran. In the case of Mahmud, his message is clear. Mahmud is a novelist, whose novels derive from his own direct life experience, especially his familiarity with the conflicting circumstances that evolved during and in the aftermath of the 1953 *coup d'etat*. Consequently, Mahmud’s novels, for the most part, deal with the recent eventful history of Iran, and in part question the status quo and corrupt power. The influence of economic recession, due to the nationalization of the oil industry, is reflected in the lives and attitudes of most of the characters in Mahmud’s novel from early on.

In the context of Mahmud’s most celebrated novel, *The Neighbors*, written a decade after the 1953 *coup d'etat*, and set in the early years of the nationalization of the oil industry, the coming of age story of a boy, Khaled, takes on a political significance and becomes an allegory for a nation struggling against the corrupt and despotic regime

²⁷⁸ György Lukács (1885 – 1971) was a Hungarian philosopher, aesthetician, literary historian, critic, and Marxist. He was the founder of Western Marxism, the interpretive tradition that departed from the Marxist ideologic orthodoxy of the USSR. He developed the theory of reification, and contributed to Marxist theory with developments of the class consciousness theory by Karl Marx. wikipedia.org/wiki/Georg_Lukács.

of Mohammad Reza Shah. The entire house and its mixture of distinct tenants, therefore, could be compared to the whole of society, which the author has handpicked to represent various classes of people.

Many themes and techniques have made this book a success and a memorable work of fiction. The realistic plotline, creation of types, use of simple, lucid and unassuming language that are the main characteristics of Mahmud's works, use of the local dialects and the culture of the southern provinces, the depiction of Karun River, the palm dates, the salty and humid air, and even the smell of fish wafting through the air, all support the fact that Mahmud attempted to write within a geography that he was familiar with himself. In a nutshell, *the Neighbors* is an extraordinary work of fiction, different and fresh, which attracts the reader immensely, and at the same time sheds light on a significant and historical decade of Iran.

Mahmud, by choosing an inexperienced and curious young boy as the hero of all his novels and the narrator/author of many of his stories, and locating and creating secondary characters who each are the representative of a dysfunctional social class, has succeeded in creating a masterpiece, harmonious with the characters, who are shaping and developing the story. Without a doubt, the main section of the story owes to creating these unimportant types that perhaps without them Khaled could not excel as an extraordinary character.

As we have witnessed, the struggle for national liberation and a new identity in the twentieth century, not only in Iran but also in many parts of the world in which

England and later the United States have sought socio-economic control and cultural domination, has produced a significant body of literary writing, both in prose and poetry. Additionally, it has produced a broader spectrum of theoretical analyses of the political, ideological, and cultural parameters of these struggles. It is no wonder that themes of the British domination and its control over the Iranian oil industry, the pocketing of its profit and generated revenue, and the interference of the foreign forces and allies are the main themes of the novel, which could also be categorized as “resistance literature.”

As Barbara Harlow states in her book *Resistance Literature*,²⁷⁹ “the present study of resistance literature, for instance, was formed to examine certain representative aspects of literature which until now have been largely excluded or ignored not only in traditional departments of literature organized according to national criteria, but even in comparative literature.”²⁸⁰ Harlow argues that, “given the current intensity of the debate and the rapid developments in contemporary literary critical theory in the West, it is important to examine the applicability of these theoretical structures and modalities outside the cultural tradition that produced them.”²⁸¹ Accordingly, Mahmud could claim ideological resemblance for the early movements that took place in Iran. And to iterate on Harlow’s statement, such theoretical questions “underlie the basic project of this study, which proposes to investigate a particular category of literature that emerged significantly as

²⁷⁹ Harlow, B. *Resistance Literature*, Rutledge, 1987.

²⁸⁰ Ibid. Preface.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

part of the organized national liberation struggles and resistance movement in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, and which may be called resistance literature.”²⁸²

The very design of Mahmud’s voluminous novels, therefore, uncovers a view of a period fraught with struggle by the leftist political party, the Tudeh Party, leaving out all other political parties and religious groups that were fighting against the oppressive Shah’s regime. As an example, a good third of the novel *The Tale of a City* is devoted to the theme of prison and the executions of the officers and high-ranking members of the Tudeh Party. By no means should this fact be interpreted as such to undermine Mahmud’s intention of drawing attention to the injustice done to this particular party and its sympathizers. After all, Mahmud has clearly differentiated between his works written in exile and the works produced thereafter and even later in the post-revolution era. He simply proposed a different type of historical fiction, one that is participatory in the historical process of hegemony and has been shaped by his immediate life experience.

As in the case of most of Mahmud’s novels, one can claim that such organization of depicting of a “one-dimensional storyline” that reflects solely the viewpoint of a particular party, could raise questions of the objectivity and, most likely, categorizes these types of novels as “autobiographical novels.” One significant disadvantage of this type of autobiographic writing is the loss of a certain historical depth and continuity to the analyses.

²⁸² Harlow, Barbara, preface.

In an essay titled “Literature on trial,” Jose Carlos Mariategui argues that “a literary theory divides the literature of a country into three periods: colonial, cosmopolitan, and national.” He states that in the first period “the country, in a literary sense, is a colony dependent on the metropolis.” In the second period, he continues, the country “simultaneously assimilates the elements of various foreign literatures.” In the third period, the country “shapes and expresses its own personality and feelings.”²⁸³

The course of action taking place in most of Mahmud’s novels suggests that he is aware of this important process; therefore, he does not interfere with the logical and natural process of his writing and lets the story take its own course and evolve organically. If we evaluate Mahmud’s work from this viewpoint, perhaps we could draw a comparison between his work and Emile Zola’s, the founder of the Naturalism movement in France.²⁸⁴ While this comparison may not be as accurate, for Mahmud essentially belongs to the school of Social Realism, and Zola to Naturalism, yet we can make an assumption that like Mahmud, Zola too believed that the “Novel is like a laboratory for the writer.”²⁸⁵ Zola also believed that the writer should put his or her prejudices aside and act just as a “witness” over the formation of the story without much authorial interpretation.²⁸⁶ Zola, who during twenty years produced twenty novels that spanned several generations of a family, Rogain, is one of the most prolific writers of the

²⁸³ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/mariategui/works/1928/essay07.htm>

²⁸⁴ Émile François Zola (1840 – 1902) was a French writer, the most important exemplar of the literary school of naturalism and an important contributor to the development of theatrical naturalism. He was a major figure in the political liberalization of. wikipedia.org/wiki/Émile_Zola.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

Naturalism school of thought. In his continued saga, Zola has narrated the natural and social development and the transformation of two families, the Rogains and the Makars, in the course of five generations, and has paid particular attention to the genetic evaluations of the characters.²⁸⁷ Zola believed that it is the writer's job to describe and dissect the lives of the characters in a novel, for the novel, in a way, is an examination of real life and real people.²⁸⁸ He also believed that the artist should look at his works from a distance to avoid unnecessary emotional intervention in the natural creation of the characters so it can result in scientific human relationships under external and internal influences.²⁸⁹ Only then, he believed, can the characters evolve organically and their actions be rendered accurately. Zola and many writers like him tend to offer a tentative and experimental viewpoint in their works that are influenced by a forced external pessimism. Yet Mahmud's position in *The Neighbors* refutes Zola and his followers' view by saying that it is not the author's job or responsibility to tell the character what to do and how to act or think, or to blame them or praise them. The importance of this aspect would be more obvious when one looks at modern Iranian novels and the kind of predicaments they have experienced.

For the most part, Mahmud uses a descriptive style and first-person narrator, which focuses on the exterior world rather than the interior. The characters' physical features, their gestures and their verbal expressions, the places they live in, towns,

²⁸⁷ wikipedia.org/wiki/Émile_Zola.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

houses, the streets, even the scents and smells, and the natural surroundings are all depicted vividly in most of Mahmud's stories. Nevertheless, his attempt at illustrating the inner thoughts, emotions and feelings of the characters fail to capture equally his readers. This shortcoming is mainly due to the use of first-person point of view, in which the narrator is limited in his scope. To offset this inadequacy, Mahmud, as the writer, is forced to use flashbacks, dreams, perhaps more than necessary, recalling the crucial events to provide the reader a larger scope; a technique he has used precisely in *The Tale of a City*. Despite its weakness in technique, by utilizing the first-person point of view, the narrator is able to transmit to the reader its immediateness and, therefore, is able to redirect its intimate relationship between the writer/narrator and the reader. Additionally, implementing the present tense technique adds an urgent tempo to the story, allowing the reader to experience the events as the narrator himself experiences them.

As an element of social realist style of writing, the characters of Mahmud's stories are mostly ordinary people, oil refinery workers, tanker drivers, shopkeepers, local fishermen, teahouse owners, and common trades people. There are also two other groups of people which Mahmud distinguishes particularly. On one hand, there are students, intelligentsia, bookstore owners, and revolutionaries, and on the other hand, there are military individuals and government officials, torturers, spies and infiltrators. In his works, especially in *The Neighbors*, Mahmud seems to have deliberately divided the segments of the society into the opposing forces of good versus evil, another characteristic of social realist works. Mahmud has also divided the communities and

differentiated the classes. The working class or proletariat, for instance, is depicted throughout as “good,” yet, in spite of that depiction, the reader has to wonder about the narrator’s sympathy for this class, which, at times, sends confusing signals. The narrator of *The Neighbors* shows great respect for the poor and working class, yet he resents their ignorance and naiveté. He insists that they are mostly doomed to end up as a “failure” since they had not many opportunities to begin with.

In contrast, those characters who are depicted as “good” tend to have a solid foundation from the beginning. It is the idiosyncratic men, like Shafaq and Pendar, whom the narrator admires the most and sees as a “father figure” or as a “big brother.” He describes them mostly as such: their voices are soft and kind, their appearances are pleasant, they speak properly and use a sophisticated vocabulary, they are well mannered, and they are mostly tall and handsome.²⁹⁰ They even have names which promise hope and goodness and bravery, and represent those who are capable of standing up to the like of Mohammad Ali Khan and the government authorities. In depicting the “good” characters in such an obvious manner, the writer/narrator attempts to draw a line between the ones who end up walking a much different path in life. His admiration for the group of bookish young men is quite evident throughout his first novel as he idolizes this group of people in particular.

On the other hand are the “evil” characters, those who appear distorted and disfigured. Their voices are either too shrill or low-pitched as of the shrieking women;

²⁹⁰ This aspect is especially seen in *The Neighbors* in which the young students and intellectuals are depicted as well-mannered, honorable and even handsome and charming.

they are mostly overweight or have a round-belly, are well fed, their cheeks reddened with blood, their eyes red and angry.²⁹¹ This group of people is the most loathed type in Mahmud's stories. The narrator despises them, although his resentment is not heard in his verbal expressions but rather in his monologue and internal thoughts. This overly descriptive method indicates momentum built in the story, inviting the reader to enter into the head of the narrator and feel his disgust and irritation. These reflections usually happen when the narrator expresses his strong dislike for a certain group of people.

This notion of binary opposition between the "good" and "evil" to portray justice versus injustice is something puzzling that the reader may have to ponder throughout Mahmud's novels. It is confusing, at times, if his attempt is to make a case that the poor are poor and act in degrading manners as they do because they are victims of circumstance and that they lack proper education and opportunities to excel, or that the ignored men would father ignorant sons, so to speak, and that the poor cannot escape their destiny as the fortunate ones who are born with "good" traits to begin with. This typecasting of the characters, all characteristics of social realist works, reflects also the mindset of Mahmud's generation of intellectuals, who perhaps believe that it is the responsibility of the intelligentsia to help this group of people, the masses, in order to lead them to emancipation.

Moreover, the narrator shows no sympathy for the lazy, parasitic characters such as the opium-addict Hajj Tofiq and Ali the Devil, who follows Khaled the Hero

²⁹¹ These negative descriptions are especially given to the interrogators, torturers, and the prison guards.

everywhere he goes, or even the malicious government agent, Gholam Ali khan, and the insincere religious figure of the neighbor, Mullah Nasrollah. In contrast, the narrator expresses his great respect for the hardworking and ordinary characters with limited means, namely, the proletariat: characters like Rahim the Donkey-Keeper, Amu Bandar, the town's sweeper, who works hard at the dawn of the day over the long winter to save money so he can send it to his grandchildren living in his village. Nor does the narrator shows much sympathy for characters like Ibram, who, unlike his hardworking twin brother, Hasani, refuses to tend to his dying mother or help his aging father, Rahim the Donkey-Keeper. As an alternative to maintaining a proper job, Ebram chooses to swindle poor, working men like his father, and commits petty theft. Clearly, the narrator has distinguished between the true working class and the freeloaders among them, and he is not shy about showing his resentment towards the latter group. He even has sympathy for Aman Aqa the teahouse keeper, who despite his cruelty toward his wife, Bolur Khanom, is still decent and generous.

Perhaps we could compare Mahmud's style of creating types to the works produced by Emile Zola whose foundation of his novels is mainly based on the evaluation and description of the physiological and emotional characteristic of a family named *les Rougon Macquart*.²⁹² Just like Mahmud, Zola's intention was to portray a

²⁹² *The Fortune of the Rougons* (French: *La Fortune des Rougon*), originally published in 1871, is the first novel in Émile Zola's monumental twenty-volume series *Les Rougon-Macquart*. The novel is partly an origin story, with a huge cast of characters swarming around - many of whom become the central figures of later novels in the series - and partly an account of the December 1851 coup d'état that created the French Second Empire under Napoleon III as experienced in a large provincial town in southern France. wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Fortune_des_Rougon.

family during several generations. Whether Mahmud studied this school of thought may not be of much importance here, but the fact is that he was very aware of creating types in his stories as it is customary in the works of social realism. Despite the fact that Émile Zola produced various works of fiction, many critics believe that he failed to create memorable and true to life characters. For Zola, there were other factors such as genetic issues that he preoccupied himself with in his novels, factors which did not mean much to Mahmud. For instance, Zola's novels mainly dealt with the story of a particular family, its various branches of offspring and descendants, principally in a twenty-year span of time.

Zola's *Les Rougon-Macquart* series of novels are a panoramic account of the Second French Empire. Almost all of these novels were written during the French Third Republic and contain over three hundred major characters, who descend from the two family lines of the Rougons and Macquarts and who are therefore, in one way or another, interrelated. In Zola's own words, which are the subtitle of the Rougon-Macquart series, they are *L'Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire*.²⁹³

The catastrophe of the reign of Napoleon III over France in the years before the disastrous defeat at Waterloo is the themes of most of these novels, such as in *Nana*, which captures particularly this defeat. Often times the provincial life described in these novels tends to be overshadowed by Zola's persistent preoccupation with the capital. Just like Mahmud's intention of drawing on his own life experience to create works such as

²⁹³ wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Fortune_des_Rougon.

The Neighbors and *The Tale of a City*, Zola too modeled upon his childhood home, Aix-en-Provence, to achieve such a portrait of *La Fortune des Rougon*, *La Conquête de Plassans*. Like Balzac,²⁹⁴ Zola's creative imagination was provoked by the metropolitan city of Paris and all that the capital represented to him symbolically.

One of the most constructive facts about Mahmud's works is his "unconditional commitment" to rendering reality, and that his writing should mirror reality. For the most part, he does not judge his characters, does not belittle them or put them on pedestals, unless these are characters, which represent the leftist intellectuals. This fact may not entirely be true and applicable to *The Neighbors*, but putting this novel aside, this concept is significantly present in his later works. Mahmud treats all of his characters, central and secondary, the same. Mostly, he allows them to speak for themselves and the reader witnesses them emerge and evolve on their own. However, at times, the voice of the author is echoed in the voice of a less important character, a fact that may take the reader by surprise and question how this character can be suddenly so intelligent and express such sophisticated political and social view. For instance, Sanam, when she tries to set up a simple oven in the courtyard in order to bake homemade bread and sell it to earn some money, she finds herself dealing with the local baker's objection and the pressure of the city ordinance to abide by rules. In protesting and standing up for her rights, her words are no longer the words of an ordinary layperson, but the refined words of an

²⁹⁴ Honoré de Balzac (1799 – 1850) was a French novelist and playwright. His magnum opus was a sequence of short stories and novels collectively entitled *La Comédie humaine*, which presents a panorama of French life in the years after the 1815 fall of Napoleon.

intellectual, hence, the words of the author himself.²⁹⁵ Besides these instances, Mahmud as the writer does not attempt to hold the string to move the characters like a puppet, but let them act according to their social status. Since these characters are not a “one-dimensional character,” the reader may perceive this sudden change as the spark of change and growth in them and not a drastically unrealistic change, enough to make them think and question their motives and course of actions.

Furthermore, Mahmud allows his protagonist, the hero of all his novels, Khaled, to fall in love with Black-Eyed, a girl from a different social class, who lives in a wealthy neighborhood, a girl completely different from other girls and women around him. His love for her is genuine and believable as any boy his age would naturally fall in love, even though Mahmud has been hasty in creating this love that comes to an abrupt end, repeating the image of the same “Ethereal Girl” captured in *The Blind Owl* of Hedayat, a dreamlike love for an unreachable beautiful woman. When it comes to Khaled’s deep love for Black-Eyed, the reader is ahead of the narrator; Khaled’s feelings and emotions are so revealed that the reader can guess his love is destined to fail, and just like the love for the “Ethereal Girl,” this love too will not end in a happy union. Mahmud, however, has gone a bit further than Hedayat, in that the narrator was able to kiss the beloved and earn her reciprocal love; alas, she too disappears and moves away, not in a dream, but in a dream-like reality.

²⁹⁵ Mahmud, A. *The Neighbors*, 198.

Nevertheless, Black-Eyed is nothing like lustful Bolur Khanom. Even though Khaled tends to compare her physical features with Bolur Khanom, yet he knows that this is a different kind of love, a kind of love to be cherished, and to be experienced at a different sensual level. The reader may pose the question why Mahmud has set Khaled up for such a heavenly and chaste love with a girl from a different social class. After all, Khaled does not represent this class. Why not have Khaled fall in love with Leila, a girl from his own neighborhood, familiar with the pain and suffering of the working class Khaled stands for. A girl who is also a comrade and shares Khaled's ideals and is brave enough to struggle for the same cause? It is precisely this lack of authorial intervention, allowing the characters to act on their own, that suggests Mahmud's understanding of this school of thought. This technique makes the story even more believable as these things happen in a real world, since life is not as orderly as it is in the world of fiction. As expected in real life, people might fall in love with the people whom they ought not to love. His characters act, feel, and react to events as they do in real life, at times illogically and spontaneously. A realist writer, therefore, Mahmud is not there to act as a puppeteer, holding the string of the characters and steering them as he wishes. On the contrary, he allows them take shape in a natural way, despite how the reader may wish for the characters to act. As it happens in real life, a young boy like Khaled may have inclination for a political party, may start to build up awareness about the poverty and injustice as he steps into the public life, yet he could still fall in love with an affluent girl from the other side of the spectrum.

In general, Khaled reacts to his level of exposure. He is not necessarily a “tough kid” whose toughness comes from his harsh surrounding; he is rather a boy who learns to be tough and at the same time acquires principles and values as he is more exposed to the conditions imposed on him. Despite a harsh upbringing and very little exposure to a good life, he is still kind and courteous and even street-smart. Though the hero of Mahmud’s novels, he is not meant to be heroic and has flaws, for he can be cruel in his rejecting Bolur Khanom, and extremely subtle in the company of Black-Eyed. Mahmud is Khaled’s creator and has granted him a freedom to make a “realistic” choice. He allows him to find and define “morality” and “immorality” on his own term. For instance, when Khaled compares Black-Eyed to Bolur Khanom, he comes to this realization on his own term, the realization that his desire for her is different from the one for Bolur Khanom. He has now a chance to explore a world outside the interior of a limited house and a restrictive neighborhood. He has also a great chance of finding new friends, discovering new streets, getting to know the city, stepping into the heart of the society. Above all, he has now new concerns, new findings that preoccupies his mind, a new awareness about himself and his place in the society, fighting a corrupt system side by side with educated young men whom he admires. He has new concerns now, making sense of a political party he has no understanding of, searching for an answer for unclear questions, and of course finding a new love, Black-Eyed, an unfamiliar girl “with a heartbreaking smile.”²⁹⁶ Ironically, with this new discovery of finding himself at a

²⁹⁶ Mahmud, A. *The Neighbors*, 221.

different point in his life, Bolur Khanom may lose her vibrant energy for the reader too. The love he feels for Black-Eyed makes Khaled no longer want Bolur Khanom, so in his mind he justifies the fact that it may be Bolur Khanom's fault after all for getting beaten up by Aman Aqa. A harsh justification on Khaled's part, but being a real character he does exactly, perhaps, what the real people tend to do in real life. After all, Khaled, too, is the product of his society and the way many men think about women.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁷ *The Neighbors* p217-218

Chapter Six

Southern Iran as the Main Setting of Mahmud's Novels

Regional Writing in Mahmud's Work

One of the most important aspects of Mahmud's writing is the setting he chooses consciously for his stories. With the exception of a few of his stories which take place in Tehran or unknown places, his stories predominantly occur in the south, in particular in his native Khuzestan. Mahmud's love for this part of the region and its diverse culture and ethnic backgrounds, especially the Arab fishermen, comes through vividly. As many critics have pointed out, Mahmud is from the south; he knows the south very well and he is aware of his native land, the many near and far villages and small towns as far as Dezful and Shushtar.²⁹⁸ As he reminds us in *The Neighbors*, he knows the city and its river Karun, its wind and soft breezes, its humidity, and its sharks and the smell of fish, its streets and the upper-town section where the wealthy oil refinery employers live, as well as the poor section with its poor working class neighborhood. So he makes the best use of this familiarity and knowledge and brings to life its local color.

His dexterous style of preserving the local color and regional dialects and accents, even the incorrect pronunciation of the English words and phrases spoken on the streets, offers the reader a close-up look at the various people who have migrated to this oil-rich

²⁹⁸ Cities located in the south of Iran near the Persian Gulf.

part of the country in search of new job opportunities and with the hope of searching for a better life. Not only the southern traditions are put on display in Mahmud's novels, but he also gives identity and voice to the common, ordinary people, especially the oil refinery and factory workers. The setting of *The Neighbors*, for example, is in an unnamed city—but most likely, Ahvaz—and the story is set against the turbulent years of nationalization of the oil industry under the government of Prime Minister Mossaddeq.²⁹⁹ Similarly, *The Tale of a City* takes place in Bandar Lengeh, although not in the Khuzestan Province, yet still in the southern part of Iran, and depicts the socio-political circumstances in the aftermath of the 1953 *coup d'état* and covers the story of imprisonment and executions of the military ranks of the left party. In *The Scorched Land*, the reader follows, once again, the story of the same protagonist unfold in his birthplace, Ahvaz. The novel delves into the beginning years of a devastating eight-year war between the two neighboring countries, Iran and Iraq, immediately after the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Additionally, what sets Mahmud's work apart from his contemporaries is the fact that he attempts to write in simple, lucid, and uncomplicated prose, a fact that may well have to do with his place of origin. Being from the south, Mahmud belongs to a people who are known for their transparency and expressiveness of feelings and emotions. But transparency and straightforwardness do not mean "writing simple." Even though Mahmud's prose may appear simple on the first glance, the reader soon finds herself

²⁹⁹ Particularly years of 1950-1954

fascinated as the story unfolds page after page and each distinct character surfaces in particular circumstances. At times, the beauty of southern landscapes, the sound of the chirping birds, the elevated palm trees, and the southern background sceneries, become so descriptive that the reader has to slow down in order to cherish these cinematic sights as if she is there herself.

According to many critics, in aesthetic terms, this new exploration in a given geography involves a radical rewriting of what critics have called “modernism’s internationalism.” Its usages of many local dialects, and its inclination to represent the subculture of the southern part of Iran are vividly rendered in Mahmud’s works. It is no wonder that Mahmud has created a young boy from the heart of a southern working class family as his pioneer protagonist not only in *The Neighbors* but also many novels still to follow. From early on, Mahmud has made a conscious choice in giving life to an adolescent boy and sending him out to the real world where tyranny and corruption dominate, so that he as an author is able to depict the two symbolic transformations of the character and the Iranian nation side by side. He has located an adolescent boy whose continued presence in the background runs parallel with a nation, which too is at the focal point of a political adolescence and awareness. The most important aspect of locating this young character, Khaled, from the southern province of Khuzestan, a land rich in natural resources such as oil and gas, is a calculated choice of depicting a geography fraught with turbulent and rapid changes. This masterfully orchestrated symbolism between Khaled’s self-realization and the nation’s awareness as attempt to break away its

social numbness and passivity, rebelling against an imposed destiny, not accepting its wealth to be reaped by the hand of foreigners, is one of the most effective techniques Mahmud utilizes in his works.

Likewise oil, “Black Gold” as Mahmud uses the term, plays a particularly central role in many of Mahmud’s novels and in particular in *The Neighbors*. Mahmud is much more familiar with the traditional lifestyle of his time rather than the modern version of a rich city life; this fact surely comes from his own experiences of working many different types of jobs in remote villages and small towns in the South. The geographical situations and its development, especially in the aftermath of the oil boom, plays a significant role in Iran; and so it does in Mahmud’s novels.

Additionally, this important aspect may also suggest that Mahmud was aware of the school of thought of social realism, to work within a framework of a region with which he was familiar. Being from the south and knowing this landscape, and working within this familiar native geography, makes him an even more skilled regional writer. Perhaps, he realized this fact from early on that no other geography was suitable enough like the south for creating the mood and the setting of his memorable novels. He has captured the transformation of young Khaled’s body and mind against the backdrop of a landscape that is inseparable from the identity of both the character and the nation. Khaled’s struggle for survival, to be able to excel beyond his impoverished, doomed upbringing, and his poor working class family, at that in the land of black gold, is an ironic contrast. The conflict and the juxtaposition of the richness of the oil on one hand

and the foreign oil companies on the other hand, in contrast to the poor, working class, and especially the oil refinery workers, is an ironic contrast, an element that Mahmud has benefited from tremendously.

The south is also the background setting of Mahmud's early works, mainly the short stories. The collection of short stories *An immigrant under the rain* is comprised of twelve short stories, simple and candid in language, stories which became the groundwork of many of Mahmud's later novels. Like most of Mahmud's stories, most characters represent the poor, underprivileged, and struggling working class people, who are stuck in a dead-end life without many choices. In addition to lack of education, many of the characters are afflicted by superstitions and a false notion of customs and traditions, and addiction to alcohol and gambling. Morad, for instance, the main character in the story "Under the Rain," is a poor, unemployed man who sells his blood only to gamble it away and goes hungry everyday in the streets.

The narrator of Mahmud's stories also attempts to illustrate the role of the British and Americans in the southern part of Iran, in particular his own hometown, Ahvaz, and the oppression and predicaments they have imposed upon the native people of this part of the country. The author, by laying down this foundation, sketches his protest against the oppressors and corrupt regimes in giving life to many southern characters in his stories. The short stories are usually devoid of heroes or protagonists, and the theme usually revolves around the concerns of the general conflict by which the society, as whole, is faced to deal with. Therefore, the oil-rich province of Khuzestan is the background of

many of Mahmud's early short stories. The colorful descriptions of the southern provinces, at times beautiful, and at times harsh and inhospitable, the hot and humid air, the burning sun, the Karun river, all reveal Mahmud's love and passion for the south that he continuously strives to paint for his readers as a painter would paint a landscape.

Additionally, the themes of industrialization and the landowner and peasant relationship, the pastoral lives and the mass migrations of the villagers to the cities in the south—especially in the aftermath of the discovery of oil and the establishment of the new oil refineries—leaving their farming lives behind in order to search for work in the oil factories, are usually the theme of Mahmud's early works, in particular the short stories. As always, Mahmud's keen eyes are on the impoverished working class, on those people who suffer the most and pay a hefty price for the imposed conditions. These themes are also, to some degree, depicted in Mahmud's later works, for instance in *The Scorched Land* as the ordinary people struggle to make ends meet and to deal with the shortage of everyday essentials like bread, eggs, rice, and gasoline.

Furthermore, themes such as disappointment, hopelessness, and regrets of a disheartened people are depicted in Mahmud's later works. For instance the changed of heart and the new views of a doubtful people, their regrets of taking to the streets, demonstrating against the former Shah's regime, only to face war and its terrible outcomes are vividly illustrated in *The Scorched Land*. Mahmud captures even the viewpoint of common people about communist ideology, and surprisingly, he even demonstrates a great respect and tolerance toward religion, an interesting point that needs

further exploration. In fact, the sound of Nanneh Baran reciting her daily prayers, the sound of religious chants and revolutionary slogans, and the sound of recitation of the Koran from the radio loom over the entire novel, *The Scorched Land*, an important factor that portrays an era of religious burgeoning in the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The story evolves as Khaled and Baran, the younger son of Nanneh Baran die, the latter on the frontline. From this point onward, Nanneh Baran becomes the heroine of the novel, determined to avenge her son's death.

Regional Writing in Mahmud's Work

Regional writing, a style of writing that deals with writing about a specific native environment, is a very intricate form of writing that not every writer is capable of accomplishing unless the author is truly familiar with its native landscape, its native people, its explicit culture, and its set customs and traditions. Otherwise, the writing will come across as forced, inauthentic, and eventually end up tiring the reader to the point that she may rather give up reading in the middle of the story. Mahmud, as a regional writer, is aware of this setback, especially when he steps away from his familiar neighborhood, his surrounding landscape, the river Karun, the familiar sultry smell of air, and the sound of singing fishermen returning home with their daily catch of fish. In the second part of *The Neighbors*, for instance, when the setting suddenly changes and the backdrop of the story is now a prison cellblock populated with various people whose main daily concern is how to pass time, the reader feels also the author's struggle in

capturing the unfamiliar scenes. This aspect of Mahmud's writing repeats itself in *The Tale of a City*, in which the most effective technique that the author utilizes to offset this shortcoming is through the use of stream of consciousness and series of flashbacks. In doing so, the narrator, who is confined to a closed surroundings, is able to leave his physical space and step back in time, and by means of remembering the scenes from the past, he continues with his narration and creates the needed balance to keep the reader engaged in the story. Just like *The Neighbors*, *The Tale of a City* is also a two-part novel, the first of which takes place in an isolated harbor, Bandar Lengeh, and the second part reveals the story of the imprisonment and the execution of the officers. Mahmud has repeated this division in his later works as well, where the storyline takes place in a limited space and environment. Many authors such as Dostoyevsky³⁰⁰ and Horst Bing have practiced this technique and style of writing as well. Dostoyevsky has implemented this division in his novel *Notes from Underground*,³⁰¹ and similarly Horst Bing has made use of this technique in his novel *The Cell*. This is a novel that, despite the fact that there is only one character in a solitary cell, still has so much potential in capturing the reader's imagination and in keeping her engaged all the way through the end of the story.

³⁰⁰(1821 – 1881), was a Russian novelist, short story writer, and essayist. Dostoyevsky's literary works explore human psychology in the troubled political, social and spiritual context of 19th-century Russia. His most memorable works are: *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. Additionally, he wrote eleven novels, three novellas, seventeen short novels and three essays, and he has been judged by many literary critics to be one of the greatest and most prominent psychologists in world literature. (wikipedia.org/wiki/Dostoyevsky).

³⁰¹ (1864), this novella is considered by many critics to be the first existentialist novel. It presents itself as an excerpt from the rambling memoirs of a bitter, isolated, unnamed narrator (generally referred to by critics as the Underground Man) who is a retired civil servant living in St. Petersburg. (wikipedia.org/wiki/Notes_from_Underground).

As mentioned earlier, the author has utilized the technique of flashback as the most effective and recurrent technique—a rather cinematic technique—yet the language used in *The Tale of a City* surpasses the novel written before as it acquired a much more sophisticated language, both in scope and in using the local and regional dialects of a much broader area of Southern part of Iran. The use of short and snappy sentences as well as the absence of sentences where verbs are omitted, very much evident in the former works, now has been replaced with fully developed, descriptive, and lucid sentences. This vivid language, amalgamated with the local dialects and regional color, has resulted in the creation of realistic and believable characters who represent the small, remote, cities with their mixture of people from various ethnic background unknown to the rest of Iranian nation.

Clash of Culture: Tradition vs. Modernity

In addition to being a regional writer, Mahmud's keen attention is also on the relationship between tradition and modernity, between the fathers' outdated state of mind, for instance, and the modern way of thinking of their sons. Although, Mahmud does not insist on depicting this conflict explicitly in his works, as it is evident in the works of Hedayat, for instance, nevertheless Mahmud calls for the reader's attention to ponder this issue. As Barbara Harlow maintains, "modernity has a complex and contradictory relationship to its seeming opposite. Modernity and tradition are relational

concepts that modernity produces to cut itself off from the past, to distinguish the ‘now’ from the ‘then.’”³⁰²

The clash of tradition and modernity, the simple ways of life replaced by industry and machines, an issue that Mahmud raises in his early short stories, also surfaces in the relationship between Khaled and his father in *The Neighbors*. Ussa Haddad who has stopped his son from continuing his schooling as early as the fourth grade is a noticeable example. Ussa Haddad, though a respected and skilled blacksmith, like any other respectable man whose outmost desire is to provide adequately for his family, is at the verge of losing his traditional metalwork business.³⁰³ To escape his poverty and to cope with his bankrupt business, he finds refuge in reading prayer books.³⁰⁴ He is a man who regularly seeks religious advice and consults with the cleric of his community, finally giving in to the counseling of Hajj Sheikh Ali who tells Ussa Haddad that “Man is one whose shoulder has gathered dust from menial work, just like yourself, a believer and God-fearing person.”³⁰⁵ Honoring the advice of Sheikh Ali, who tells him as long as his young son is able to read the basic Arabic, he has had enough schooling, he gives in and keeps his son at home instead of sending to school. Of course, it may not be Ussa Haddad’s true intention to stop his son’s early education; nevertheless, he gives in to Sheikh Ali’s advice. The reader is not provided detailed information about the young boy has been doing since nine or ten years old, and whether the narrator has been

³⁰² Harlow, B. *Resistance Literature*.

³⁰³ Mahmud, A. *The Neighbors*, 15.

³⁰⁴ Here it refers to the prayer book of *Asrar-e Ghasemi*, a book that Khaled’s father often reads.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 16-17

working with his father. But the author has set up the scene to present the reader a reason why he disliking this group of ignorant people such as the neighborhood's cleric. His resentment of the outdated way of thinking, especially the religious interpretation of how one should live one's life, is rendered especially when he compares the softness of Hajj Sheikh Ali to the "white and lard-like soft hands of Bolur Khanom."³⁰⁶ He is a man who preaches and instructs others to do menial work, while he himself does not have to do any hard work.

Critics usually regard modernism as the "expressive dimension of modernity," one that encompasses a range of styles among creative forms that share family resemblances based on an engagement with the historical conditions of modernity in a particular location.³⁰⁷ Young Khaled, the narrator, thus turns from his father's ways of life toward that of the young people like Shafaq and Pendar. Mahmud creates another character to stand against this outdated mindset, namely Mohammad the Mechanic. The presence of Mohammad the Mechanic in *The Neighbors* compared to other characters is rather unusual. Even though he is not a main character, still he reappears in many of Mahmud's novels, expressing what he needs to say, then somehow disappearing. Jalali argues that "Mahmud has created this character only to come and spread his heavy and thoughtful shadow over the novel and leaves, even though his sudden disappearance in the novel is rather ambiguous and perplexed."³⁰⁸ This perplexing ending appears to be

³⁰⁶ Mahmud, A. *The Neighbors*, 29.

³⁰⁷ *Cultural Critique of Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004)

³⁰⁸ Jalali. F. *Baran bar Zamin-e Sukhteh*, 98-99.

troublesome especially when the reader is aware that the writer has created types with specific characteristic behaviors. In particular, that every one of the secondary characters in various novels, especially those who are given a relative importance, come to life at some point and leave the novel at some other point in a logical manner. It is Mohammad the Mechanic, nevertheless, who does not share this characteristic; he comes and expresses his opinion, he protests, he often uses big words, and soon he leaves without having much relationship to the other characters. Although he too comes from the working class, he does not share the superstitious beliefs of the like of Amu Bandar, or the addicts or smugglers, and does not want to have anything to do with the traditional and religious ways of Ussa Haddad who believes “Mohammad the Mechanic’s place is in the abyss of hell.”³⁰⁹ Mohammad the Mechanic, on the other hand, is critical of Ussa Haddad and his prayer book, *Asrar-e Ghasemi*.

Despite the fact that Ussa Haddad does not abandon his belief, he simply one day decides to put the prayer book aside without uttering a word of rejection or explanation as to why he has no more faith in this book. Instead, he begins taking another approach and Mahmud is wise here to leave his character to himself and not to question his motives as to why he has just made such a drastic change of heart in compromising his faith. Mahmud only uses Mohammad the Mechanic to criticize the superstitious belief, to conjure thought provoking ideas in his readers and to point out the issue in passing.

³⁰⁹ Mahmud, A. *The Neighbors*, 36.

One of the most important points observed in Mahmud's works is his neutral stance in dealing with religious rituals, especially the rituals of those who are rather more superstitious than religious. He does not attack religion and still shows sympathy for those who truly have faith as in the case of Khaled's father, Ussa Haddad, or Amu Bandar. He is careful not to come across as a social critic and anti-religion critic and, when possible, tries to show a dead-end and futile way of believing in these useless superstitions, as it is true that at last Ussa Haddad closes the prayer book of *Asrar-e Ghasemi* and seeks a practical work in Kuwait city.

Typically, Mahmud tends to choose sideline characters rather than a central character to do the job of criticizing and mocking these extreme traditions and superstitions, for instance he makes use of Mohammad Mechanic whenever he needs him to speak and criticize in many of his novels. That is why sometimes the voice of the writer may be echoed in the character's voice, since Mahmud has given special attention to Mohammad the Mechanic. His wife, for instance, is quiet and unlike the other female characters in the stories; she is depicted as a good wife, busy with her life and raising her family. The presence of Mohammad Mechanic at times becomes problematic especially when the character appears, says something, or does something to prove a point and disappears rather quickly. He is rather a symbolic character who represents a heroic figure with a certain political view and modern mentality, who is always in the forefront of fighting the corrupt authorities and systems. He represents and stands for a higher,

more valuable cause, especially a political view, which is so much in line with the author's view, whose function is to validate this view in different forms and situations.

Many critics see this point as a shortcoming in Mahmud's writings, but if one really pays close attention to many of the great writers of the world, in particular the realist writers, one can see that their writing and their creation of characters is very much a reflection of the real events and characters that the author has come across at one point or another in his real life. It is, therefore, a logical and natural process for these writers to insist on creating types, especially a few of the main characters or even side characters, in order to put words in their mouths according to the author's viewpoint in a very artistic way so as not only to rely on these characters, but also to validate the points the author tries to make. After all, the author is the creator of the story and gives life to the novel and the characters who surface on the page. In other words, it is the author who masks himself behind the faces of his characters. And, of course, how successfully this technique may be applied will depend on the author's skill and his esthetic and artistic imaginations. It is for this reason that many dictatorial governments are afraid of this fact and the level of power and influence of novels on the readers and their threatening effects on their foundation and existence. Some of the greatest novels have had the ability to shake the foundation of many despotic regimes throughout history, novels the existence of which has brought great changes in society by questioning authority and power.

Consequently, we could argue that the creation of Mohammad the Mechanic is a conscious choice that Mahmud has made to have the character talk and act at certain

points and time to reflect the writer's personal view. This view becomes particularly apparent in the arguments exchanged between Mohammad the Mechanic and Ussa Haddad, at a crucial time when the reader waits for the narrator's reaction to utter his disagreement, but since the reader is aware that the main character, Khaled, is much too young and inexperienced to retort or express words of protest, the creation of Mohammad the Mechanic seems justified.

In essence, Khaled never questions or criticizes his father's superstitious belief and Ussa Haddad never gives up his religious conviction, not even when he returns from Kuwait and finds his son in prison. Standing proud and looking at his son admiringly, he still reminds his son, "God is the greatest and that one should have faith in Him."³¹⁰ His kind words stir such joy in Khaled's heart as his father reassures him, "Do not have sorrow. Even the Imam Ja'far Sadeq was imprisoned."³¹¹ His strong faith leaves Khaled speechless. "This much fate?" he thinks to himself, "I feel as if I'm breaking into pieces, for I feel nothing in compared to such strong faith. I feel I am nothing."³¹² This scene reveals Mahmud's faithfulness to a reality, where faith and religion are an integral

³¹⁰ Mahmud, A. *The Neighbors*, 432.

³¹¹ Ibid, 432.

³¹² Ibid. 433-434.

part of real life. Being a realist writer, Mahmud writes as it is expected of a realist writer, and creates real and plausible characters as believable and real as they ought to act in the real life.

The Teahouse as a Focal Point in Mahmud's Work

Often, a house, a town square, or even the city itself, becomes an important focal point in Mahmud's novels where the narrator spends most of his time in order to tell the story through the actions of the characters. In addition to these places, the existence of the "teahouse" or "*ghahvehkhaneh*" becomes a major and recurring focal point in most of Mahmud's novels. As an example, "Mehdi Papati's teahouse" serves as a central gathering place in the novel *The Scorched Land* "Ahan's teahouse" plays a central role in the novel *The Tale of a City* and Aman Aqa's teahouse becomes an important meeting place in the novel *The Neighbors* where the characters usually gather around not only to drink tea and be entertained but also to hear the latest news on the political events. The teahouse becomes also a necessary focal point for the narrator to give an account of many of the characters' actions or simply to report news and convey this information and storyline to the readers. The teahouse thus is not merely a physical place for the characters to hang out, but a traditionally accessible broadcasting place that the author/narrator makes use of as a focal point. Also, when Mehdi Papati's teahouse is bombed and completely ruined, and the narrator having lost his place of retreat has no place else to go, at which point the story ends.

The interesting or rather unusual aspect of depicting the teahouse in Mahmud's novels, however, is the presence of female characters and their lively interaction in the teahouse where traditionally is perceived as a place exclusively for men, as it is depicted by constructing Aman Aqa's teahouse in *The Neighbors*. In Mahmud's later novels, the reader is introduced to female characters who come and go at ease with no particular concerns expressed by men. Qadamkheyr, Nanneh Baran, and Batouli are examples of these women who come to these traditional teahouses. Batouli, a young girl of about fourteen, who is not right in her mind, is an example of ordinary women presented in *The Scorched Land*. In fact, Batouli is another extension of Banu of *The Neighbors*. Batouli, the fairly mentally slow daughter of Kal Sha'ban, oddly enough, comes and goes to the teahouse as she wishes, disregarding her mother's orders.

Mahmud makes use of the traditional teahouses to portray the common, ordinary people, his simple characters, but he introduces another place in his stories, mainly a bookstore or a modern café where the intellectuals such as Shafaq and Pendar are patrons, and cafés where the presence of modern young girls, though rarely seen, come to life. Mojahed Bookstore, for instance is a central location where the political activists such as Shafaq, Pendar, Bidar, Doctor, and many young intellectuals whom the narrator admires spend time and gather around to exchange ideas, books and magazines. Mojahed Bookstore plays an important role in enhancing the curiosity of the protagonist Khaled in *The Neighbors* and his political transformation.

Prison and its large cellblock with its distinctive prisoners is another focal point used often in Mahmud's novels. More importantly, this limited space allows Mahmud to create a place where the main character or the hero begins from a starting point, makes a circular journey, undergoes changes and transformations and with it takes the reader along, and finishes his journey, yet completely transformed.

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